



Australian Government
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Children's experiences of family animal abuse in domestic and family violence

Australian Institute of Family Studies

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

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Questions or comments? Please contact CFCA at cfca-exchange@aifs.gov.au

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Sensitive content warning

This resource includes information about domestic and family violence, child abuse and animal abuse. If you require assistance or would like to talk to a trained professional about the issues described in this paper, please call:

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Sexual assault and family violence service: 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)

If you believe someone is in immediate danger call **Police** on 000.

If you require assistance in relation to animal abuse, this can be reported to the **RSPCA**: [Report animal cruelty](#) | [RSPCA Australia](#)

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CFCA policy and practice papers provide evidence-informed overviews of complex issues affecting children, families and communities. They examine what we know about a topic of interest, what works and for whom, and translate evidence into implications for policy, practice and service delivery.

Overview

This resource describes what the research evidence says about children's experiences of family animal abuse in the context of domestic and family violence (DFV). It outlines what DFV-related family animal abuse looks like, children's experiences of DFV-related violence against family animals and the impacts this can have on children. It also provides some considerations for practitioners who work with children and families impacted by, or experiencing, DFV that may include family animal abuse.

For information about adult victim-survivors of DFV-related violence against family animals this AIFS policy and practice guide summarises the research evidence about [Violence against family animals in the context of intimate partner violence](#) and provides practice recommendations for practitioners working with adult victim-survivors who have experienced this.

Key messages

- DFV-related family animal abuse is a serious and under-recognised form of child maltreatment and adversity. It can be a risk marker for other forms of abuse, including child abuse, occurring in the home.
- DFV-related family animal abuse is when people who use violence¹ threaten or harm family animals to cause emotional distress and to manipulate, intimidate and control other family members, including children.
- Family animals are special to many children. When children experience adversity, such as DFV, the friendship and emotional support provided by family animals can become even more significant.
- Children experience many negative impacts when DFV-related family animal abuse is perpetrated in the home. This can include physical, emotional and psychological impacts.
- Children who experience DFV-related family animal abuse are more likely to normalise and replicate harmful behaviours towards family animals than children who have not experienced DFV-related family animal abuse.
- Practitioners working with children who have experienced DFV-related family animal abuse should recognise that children are victim-survivors in their own right. They should adopt a child-focused approach that recognises that children will have unique experiences and support needs that may differ from their parent/caregiver's needs and concerns.

¹ The term 'person/people who use violence' is used throughout this resource to describe adults who perpetrate domestic or family violence. This aligns with the shift towards person-first and inclusive language that focuses on the actions, rather than defining a person by the act. This shift is intended to acknowledge that change is possible and recognises the role of individual agency in desisting from using violence. We acknowledge that terminology in this domain can be contested and the use of this terminology is intended to be as broad and inclusive as possible.

Introduction

Domestic and family violence (DFV)² is widespread in Australia, disproportionately affecting women and children. Statistics show that 1 in 4 women have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV)³ (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023) and more than 1 in 3 children have experienced DFV (Haslam et al., 2023).

This includes the child directly experiencing physical, verbal, emotional or sexual abuse in the home as well as what has been described as 'exposure' to DFV; that is, seeing or hearing violence towards other family members including parents, siblings and family animals (i.e. pets) (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2022; Haslam et al., 2023).

Approximately 70% of Australian households include family animals. Families with children are more likely to include family animals than families without children (Animal Medicines Australia, 2025). Children commonly share meaningful relationships with their family animals and consider them important family members (Applebaum et al., 2021; Budinski & Gahan, 2023; Callaghan et al., 2025; Groenewoud et al., 2023).

For children who have experienced adversity, relationships with family animals can be especially significant. Family animals can increase a child's sense of safety, protection and being able to cope. They can also provide joy, reciprocal friendship and emotional support (Applebaum et al., 2021; Arkow, 2019; Callaghan et al., 2025; Hawkins et al., 2019; Newberry, 2017).

Given the high prevalence of DFV and of families with animals, it is unsurprising that family animals are often present in households where there is DFV. Some people who use violence threaten or harm family animals to coerce, control and exert power over other family members.

Family animal abuse is increasingly recognised as a form of DFV in itself (Callaghan et al., 2025; DSS, 2022; Wakeham, 2025). Furthermore, research evidence shows that family animal abuse can be an indicator of other frequent or severe patterns of DFV, including child abuse, in the home (Arkow, 2019; Barbosa-Torres et al., 2024; Muri et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2025).

To date, most of the research about violence against family animals in a DFV context focuses on the experiences of adult female victim-survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Barbosa-Torres et al., 2024; Cleary et al., 2021; Hageman et al., 2018).

However, children are often present in homes in which IPV or DFV takes place. When children experience DFV, including family animal abuse, they should be seen as victim-survivors in their own right (Callaghan et al., 2025; DSS, 2022; McDonald, Cody, Collins et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2025).

Experiencing DFV-related family animal abuse is a serious and under-recognised form of child maltreatment and adversity. Children will have specific support needs, separate or additional to the support needs of adult victim-survivors, when their family animals have been threatened or harmed (Callaghan et al., 2025; McDonald et al., 2025; Spencer et al., 2025).

This resource summarises the evidence from an emerging body of research on children's experiences of violence perpetrated against family animals in the context of DFV. It outlines:

- what family animal abuse looks like in a DFV context
- children's experiences of family animal abuse in a DFV context
- the impacts on children of violence against family animals
- considerations for practitioners working with children and their families in the context of DFV.

2 Domestic and family violence (DFV) refers to violence between intimate partners (intimate partner violence [IPV]) and violence perpetrated by parents or caregivers against children, between other family members and in family-like settings (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2022).

3 Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to any behaviour within an intimate relationship (including current or past marriages, domestic partnerships or dates) that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm. It is also commonly referred to as 'domestic violence' (DSS, 2022).

What family animal abuse looks like in the context of DFV

The *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* (DSS, 2022) recognises family animal abuse as one of several violent behaviours that can constitute DFV. The abuse of animals can take multiple forms, including verbally abusing, teasing or tormenting, kicking, punching, throwing, burning, poisoning, dumping or killing family animals (Arkow, 2019; Barbosa-Torres et al., 2024; Collins et al., 2018; McDonald, Cody, Collins et al., 2018; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022).

Dogs and cats are the most commonly harmed family animals; however, any animal that other family members have an emotional connection with can be at risk (Barbosa-Torres et al., 2024; Callaghan et al., 2025; Spencer et al., 2025; Tiplady et al., 2015).

There can be several motivations for animal abuse. Some people who use violence will threaten, harm or kill family animals to:⁴

- intimidate, manipulate or force family members to follow their demands
- punish others for not doing what the person using violence wants them to do
- intentionally cause family members to feel emotional distress or fear
- express jealousy that the family animal receives love and attention from other family members.

For homes with multiple family animals, people who use violence will often specifically target the animal(s) that victim-survivors, including children, have the strongest emotional connection to (Arkow, 2019; Callaghan et al., 2025; McDonald et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2025).

Children's experiences of DFV-related family animal abuse

Children can experience DFV-related family animal abuse in multiple ways, including:⁵

- being aware that the person using violence is threatening or harming their family animal without directly seeing it happen
- witnessing the person using violence threatening, physically abusing or killing their family animal
- being manipulated or forced by the person using violence to participate in family animal abuse. For example:
 - threatening the child that something worse will happen (to them or their animal) if they don't participate in the abuse
 - preventing the child (or other family members) from providing necessary care to their family animal (e.g. food, water, shelter, comfort).

For many children, family animals provide a reliable and consistent source of support and comfort. This can be especially important when children's relationships with others in the home are strained, unpredictable or lacking affection due to DFV, or when the person using violence isolates children from family and friends who could otherwise offer support (Applebaum et al., 2021; Callaghan et al., 2025).

People who use violence against family animals know how important family animals are to children (and other family members) and exploit these emotional connections to exert control and power over victim-survivors (Callaghan et al., 2025; Hawkins et al., 2019; Melson, 2019; Muri et al., 2022). For example, people who use violence will sometimes use violence against family animals to drive a wedge between children and adult victim-survivors in the home. This can include (Arkow, 2019; Giesbrecht, 2022; Lindsay, 2022; Wakeham, 2025):

- blaming the child's mother for family animal abuse ('she made me do it')
- saying that the child's mother gave away the family animal (if the animal has disappeared)
- threatening to seriously hurt or kill the child's family animal if their mother leaves the relationship.

4 Arkow, 2019; Barbosa-Torres et al., 2024; Callaghan et al., 2025; Collins et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2025

5 Arkow, 2019; Callaghan et al., 2025; Dam, 2020; McDonald et al., 2019; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2025; Wakeham, 2025

People who use violence can also exploit the special relationships children share with their family animals by using threats or harm to family animals to manipulate the child to keep quiet about other forms of abuse (e.g. child physical or sexual abuse) happening in the home (Arkow, 2019; Muri et al., 2022).

Another common and extremely challenging experience for children is being separated from family animals due to DFV. This can be due to direct violent actions; for example, if the person who uses violence gives away, dumps or kills their family animal. However, separation can also occur if the family animal is rehomed or placed in temporary care for their own safety; or if the child and their mother/caregiver leave the violent relationship to seek safety but cannot take their family animal with them (Arkow, 2019; Callaghan et al., 2025; Giesbrecht, 2022; McDonald et al., 2025; Newberry, 2017).

Impacts of family animal abuse on children

Violence against family animals has significant short- and long-term effects on children's health and wellbeing. In this section, we briefly describe some of the negative effects on children of family animal abuse, including:

- physical impacts
- emotional and psychological challenges
- children's use of harmful behaviours toward family animals.

Physical impacts

It is common for children to want to protect their family animals when they are being mistreated. However, this can increase the child's own risk of being targeted. For example, children might physically intervene or plead with the person using violence to stop during a violent incident toward their family animal or try to hide their family animal if they sense the person who uses violence is in a bad mood. These actions can increase the risk of physical harm and injury to the child if the person who uses violence redirects their aggression (Arai et al., 2021; Giesbrecht et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald, Cody, Collins et al., 2018).

Children can also experience physical symptoms of ill-health, such as stomach pains, headaches or anxious symptoms, related to the stress and worry caused by family animal abuse (Applebaum et al., 2021; Arai et al., 2021).

Emotional and psychological impacts

Children who live with DFV-related violence against family animals may experience numerous negative emotional and psychological impacts, including:⁶

- feelings of anxiety, distress, fear, grief, guilt, helplessness, sadness and shame about what is happening, or might happen, to their family animal
- a sense of mutual suffering with their family animals
- increased risk of experiencing symptoms of mental ill-health, such as heightened emotional reactivity or dysregulated stress physiology⁷
- the development of internalising and externalising behaviours
- increased likelihood of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder.

Furthermore, children may experience confusion and mixed emotions about their relationship with their family animal. Children may enjoy and benefit from the friendship, comfort and support provided by their family animal and feel pride in their caregiving role toward their family animal. At the same time, they may feel guilty, conflicted or unsure because they know the person who uses violence is targeting their family animal because the child loves and cares for them or because they cannot protect their family animal from harm (Arkow, 2019; McDonald et al., 2025).

Many of these impacts are similar to those experienced by children who experience other types of DFV. However, DFV-related violence towards family animals can add another layer of complexity to how children are feeling,

6 Arkow, 2019; Giesbrecht, 2022; Ladny & Meyer, 2020; McDonald et al., 2025; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022

7 Dysregulated stress physiology refers to a state of imbalance in the nervous system where the body's stress responses chronically over- or under-react to everyday stimuli or situations as if they are genuine threats (McLaughlin et al., 2014).

coping with and affected by DFV. Research shows that when children experience multiple forms of adversity or maltreatment, they are at increased risk of experiencing negative short- and long-term emotional and psychological impacts (Haslam et al., 2023; McDonald et al., 2025).

Separation from family animals

Separation from family animals can be challenging and traumatic and have negative impacts on the child's wellbeing. When children are separated from their family animals, they can:⁸

- feel helpless, powerless or without agency. Children usually have little or no say in what happens to their family animals and sometimes do not know where their animal is or if they are safe or alive.
- experience grief, loss, distress and worry
- lose an important source of safety, comfort, familiarity and friendship. For some children, separation from their family animal can disrupt one of their few reliable and positive relationships
- 'act out' in anger or blame towards their parent/caregiver for not being able to keep their family animal with them and/or not being able to keep their family animal safe from harm.

Children's harmful behaviours towards family animals

Most children who experience DFV-related violence against their family animal will not go on to use similar behaviours towards animals. However, children with these experiences are more likely to use violence against family animals than children who have not experienced DFV-related family animal abuse (Applebaum et al., 2021; Arkow, 2019; Collins et al., 2018; Ladny & Meyer, 2020; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022).⁹

Studies with children have documented multiple ways in which this can happen. Some people who use violence will encourage, manipulate or force children to tease, taunt or physically hurt family animals. This can be a way of exerting control and causing emotional distress to other family members in a DFV setting (Collins et al., 2018).

Children might also replicate harmful behaviours (e.g. hitting, restraining, shouting) to punish animals for perceived 'bad' behaviours, even when these are often normal animal behaviours (e.g. barking or meowing, chewing on things) or typical fear-based responses (e.g. toileting inside, growling or hiding/not coming when called). This is because children are more likely to think this is a 'normal' or 'okay' way to treat family animals when they see the person who uses violence punishing or 'training' family animals using harmful behaviours (Collins et al., 2018; McDonald, Cody, Booth et al., 2018; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022). Children might also replicate behaviours as a way of protecting themselves by seeming to align with the person who uses violence (Campbell et al., 2023).

There are also examples where, in extreme circumstances, children have physically injured, killed, given away or let their family animal 'run away' from the home in an attempt to protect their family animals from further violence (McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald, Cody, Collins et al., 2018).

A child who uses harmful behaviours towards family animals in a context where this has been 'normalised' can still have a close and emotionally important relationship with their family animal and experience conflict and confusion about these behaviours (Collins et al., 2018; McDonald, Cody, Booth et al., 2018). When a child has been forced to use harmful behaviours towards their family animal or has done so believing they are protecting their family animal from the person who uses violence, this can be particularly distressing and traumatic (Mota-Rojas et al., 2022).

⁸ Arkow & Hoy-Gerlach, 2025; Callaghan et al., 2025; Campbell et al., 2023; Giesbrecht, 2022; McDonald et al., 2025; Newberry, 2017; Wakeham, 2025

⁹ It is important to note that the evidence is inconclusive about whether children who have mistreated animals in a DFV context are more likely than other children to continue to use harmful behaviours toward animals as they grow older (Alleyne & Parfitt, 2019; Ladny & Meyer, 2020).

Practice considerations

Research evidence highlights a need for evidence-based support strategies that address children's exposure to violence against family animals and the range of physical, emotional and psychological impacts they can experience as a result.

It is important that support services adopt a child-focused approach that acknowledges and considers children's experiences, including the importance and benefits of their relationships with family animals. Practitioners working with children who have experienced DFV and who had or have family animals can:¹⁰

- Recognise children as victim-survivors in their own right, not simply as bystanders who 'witnessed' or were 'exposed to' DFV and family animal abuse.
- Understand that children will have their own support needs or concerns that are separate from their parent/caregiver's needs and concerns.
- Be curious and ask questions about the child's relationship with their family animal. This includes being mindful of the diversity of children's experiences – listen to their stories and validate their concerns and feelings.
- Listen to any concerns children have about their family animals and treat disclosures of witnessing, experiencing or using animal abuse as seriously and sensitively as any other form of child abuse:
 - Be aware that family animal abuse can be a red flag for other forms of abuse that may be happening in the home.
- Recognise that if a child is normalising or using harmful behaviour toward family animals that this is likely an effect of their own trauma and consider whether referring them to specialist support or counselling may be beneficial.
- Understand that family animals are often an important relational resource for children, particularly during adverse circumstances such as DFV, where children may have few adults in their lives that they feel they can rely on or trust.
- Recognise that family animals can support healing, providing an ongoing and safe source of comfort, love, support and reciprocal care for children and adult victim-survivors.
- Where possible, DFV services should try and help victim-survivors and their family animals to stay together or to find safe accommodation and care for family animals. When family animals are not able to stay with the family, practitioners should provide children with age-appropriate explanations and information. This can be crucial to maintaining or repairing the child's bond with the safe caregiver.

Conclusion

The relationship between DFV-related violence against family animals and other forms of DFV, including IPV and child abuse, is increasingly recognised. When people who use violence make threats towards or harm family animals as a means of exerting power and control over others in the home, this can be incredibly distressing for children.

Children often form close emotional relationships with family animals, and these bonds are sometimes stronger when children and family animals have shared experiences of adversity. DFV-related violence against family animals negatively affects the emotional and psychological wellbeing of children (and other victim-survivors in the home).

Children may feel responsible for protecting their family animal from the person who uses violence; experience grief and loss if they are separated from their family animal; or live with feelings of anxiety, worry, helplessness and stress about what is or might happen to their family animal. Some children may also begin to normalise harm towards their family animals.

It is important that practitioners working with children and families who have experienced DFV-related family animal abuse understand the important role that family animals play in many people's lives and recognise the negative impacts that DFV-related family animal abuse can have on people. Practitioners should adopt a child-focused approach to try to understand the child's experiences of DFV, their relationship with their family animal and what their unique concerns and support needs are, separate from their parent's/caregiver's needs and experiences.

¹⁰ Arai et al., 2021; Callaghan et al., 2025; McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald, Cody, Collins et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2019; Safe and Equal, 2023; Spencer et al., 2025

About the research this article is based on

This resource draws on qualitative studies (Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA) and review papers that included examination of children's experiences of DFV-related violence against family animals.

The studies and review papers included in this resource were identified as part of a rapid literature review conducted in 2023 about [Violence against family animals in the context of intimate partner violence](#). An additional targeted search was conducted to identify studies published from 2023 to 2025.

The research evidence provided descriptive in-depth insights into the experiences of child victim-survivors of DFV that included family animal abuse. Qualitative data were drawn from surveys and interviews with children (7–18 years old) or their mothers. Participants in these studies were recruited from DFV support services, including crisis accommodation. When mothers reported on their children's experiences, this was usually part of a larger study about family animal abuse and intimate partner violence.

These studies provide useful information of children's experiences of DFV-related family animal abuse and impacts. It is important to note, however, that it is very hard to measure how prevalent DFV-related family animal abuse is and that there is little research detailing the experiences of children and families who have not yet accessed support services. This means there is a gap in evidence about early risk factors, experiences and support needs of families and children before crisis.

Further reading and resources

AIFS resources

[Violence against family animals in the context of intimate partner violence](#)

Violence against family animals can be an indicator of frequent and severe patterns of intimate partner violence (IPV). This resource describes what we know about the relationship between IPV and violence against family animals, impacts on victim-survivors, and practice considerations for supporting clients who may be experiencing violence against family animals in an IPV context.

[Violence against pets in the context of intimate partner violence: Supporting victim-survivors](#)

This webinar explores practical ways that practitioners working in child and family services can strengthen support for human and animal victim-survivors of violence against family animals in an intimate partner violence (IPV) context. It includes information about understanding the relationship between violence against family animals and IPV, the emotional connection between people and animals, and the unique challenges victim-survivors of IPV who have family animals may experience when trying to access support.

[What the research evidence tells us about coercive control victimisation](#)

Coercive control is the ongoing and repetitive use of behaviours or strategies to control a current or ex intimate partner. This resource presents findings from a rapid literature review about coercive control victimisation, including prevalence, risk factors and impacts.

Other resources

[In focus: Family and domestic violence and children](#)

This Emerging Minds resource provides information about how FDV affects children's mental health and parent-child relationships, and how to make children visible and amplify their voices.

[Supporting victim survivors of family violence with family animals](#)

This resource, from [Safe and Equal](#), shares information from the Family Animals in Refuge Project that aimed to increase the capacity of the refuge sector and other service providers to assist victim-survivors of family violence with family animals to support the safety, wellbeing and recovery of human and animal victim-survivors.

Information about support services

Lucy's Project

Lucy's Project is a national charity that aims to improve the safety of people and animals experiencing domestic and family violence through collaboration, advocacy, research and education (CARE).

Safe Pets Safe Families

Safe Pets Safe Families is a charity, based in South Australia, that works with foster carers and boarding services to provide last resort crisis care and a range of programs to provide broader support services to vulnerable pet owners experiencing DFV. It also runs the [Our Youth and Pets Program \(YAPP\)](#) program, which provides empathy and education about responsible pet interactions to youth and adolescents who have experienced violence and animal abuse.

RSPCA Knowledge base: Is there a link between domestic violence and animal abuse?

The RSPCA knowledge base resource has information on domestic violence and animal abuse, including a link where people can contact individual state or territory branches for support.

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