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Published in:
Journal of Family Violence

DOI:
[10.1007/s10896-023-00659-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00659-8)

Publication date:
2023

Licence:
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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Callaghan, J. E. M., Fellin, L. C., Mavrou, S., Alexander, J. H., Deligianni-Kouimtzi, V., Papathanassiou, M., & Sixsmith, J. (2023). Part of the Family: Children's Experiences with Their Companion Animals in the Context of Domestic Violence and Abuse. *Journal of Family Violence*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00659-8>

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Part of the Family: Children's Experiences with Their Companion Animals in the Context of Domestic Violence and Abuse

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Accepted: 9 October 2023
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Abstract

Purpose Children who experience Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) draw on a range of strategies to manage the complex dynamics of family life. This article explored children's experiences of their relationships with pets and other animals, considering how children understood these relationships.

Methods This qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews and visual methods-based research with 22 children (aged 9–17), drawn from a larger study on how children cope with DVA. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings Five themes are discussed: *Part of the family* explores how children positioned animals as relational beings who occupied an important place in their lives; *caring for animals* considers the reciprocal caring relationship children described; *listening and support* details how children interacted with animals to allow themselves to feel more heard and supported; in the theme *control and abuse*, we consider children's experiences of perpetrators' use of companion animals as part of a pattern of abuse and control; and *in disruption, uncertainty and loss*, we discuss how children feel and relate to their animals when leaving situations of domestic abuse.

Conclusions The implications of our analysis are considered in relation to providing support for children impacted by domestic abuse, and the importance of ensuring companion animals are provided for in housing policy and planning for domestic abuse survivors.

Keywords Domestic Abuse · Coercive Control · Children, Qualitative Research · Companion Animals · Pets

Research in the field of Companion Animal Studies has established the potential emotionally protective and therapeutic value of human interaction with pets and other animals (Borgi & Cirulli, 2022; Giraudet et al., 2022; Hawkins

et al., 2022; Lass-Hennemann et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022; Wells et al., 2022). Theorists have suggested that caring for pets might enhance autonomy and self-efficacy, contributing to children's resilience in conditions of adversity

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(Gilligan, 2000). In a general population study, it was found that pets can provide emotional support during hard times with children reporting high levels of companionship with their pets, including high levels of disclosure to pets and satisfying pet-child relationships (Cassels et al., 2017). In one study, primary carers were asked to rate levels of intrafamilial conflict and interactions with pets and found children's attachment to companion animals increased with rates of family conflict – suggesting perhaps that loving relationships with pets might reduce conflict in families (Applebaum & Zsembik, 2020). Studies during the COVID lockdown period suggested pets helped people to mitigate the negative effects of lockdown restrictions (Ratschen et al., 2020). This research suggests children's relationship with family pets and other animals can have beneficial impacts on their health and wellbeing.

Pets (particularly dogs) can act as a safety or protection measure adopted by human victims to defend themselves from physical assaults; indeed, in many instances dogs do intervene to protect human victims from perpetrators (Giesbrecht, 2022). Positive relationships with companion animals can be a potential emotional protective factor for children (Hawkins et al., 2019). A small body of literature has explored the positive impact of having pets, and the harms associated with witnessing animal cruelty, on children who have experienced Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA). Research in this area has produced mixed and at times seemingly contradictory results. For example, using psychometric and survey tools, Hawkins et al. (2019) found positive relationships with pets moderated the impact of exposure to DVA, reducing internalizing and post traumatic symptoms. The same study also found neither exposure to animal cruelty nor positive relationships with children moderated *externalising* behaviours (Matijczak et al., 2020). In other words, although relationships with pets seemed to be associated with reduced problems like depression, anxiety and trauma symptoms, it didn't reduce children's behavioural problems. In contrast, Rodriguez et al. (2021) found that positive relationships with pets did *not* moderate the mental health impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), whereas so-called Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs) did. (BCEs include for example, a sense of belonging at school, a positive relationship with a grandparent, a warm relationship with a carer, having a good friend, etc., see Narayan et al., 2018) However, Murphy et al. (2022) did find children who had positive relationships with pets were less likely to develop “callous and unemotional traits” (p.19), despite IPV and animal cruelty exposure, thus suggesting that traumatic impact –often reified as such traits- could be reduced by these bonds. This literature in balance suggests having warm relationships with pets and

other animals might have some benefits for children who have experienced DVA.

Unfortunately, it is also well established that perpetrators of DVA often direct their abusive and controlling behaviours to companion animals. Domestic abusers abuse their pet animals directly (Newberry, 2017) and as a tool of control over their human victims (McDonald et al., 2015). Perpetrators use the threat and reality of animal abuse as part of a broader pattern of coercing and controlling their human victims (both adult partners / ex partners, and children) (McDonald et al., 2015). The literature on childhood experiences of DVA and experiences with companion animals largely focuses on the co-occurrence of the two phenomena, the potential impact on children, and whether the relationship with pets might act as a protective factor.

Perpetrators of DVA who abuse pets are more likely to have higher rates and more diverse forms of controlling and abusive behaviours (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). Survey and qualitative research has documented patterns of perpetrator threats to hurt or kill family pets when the family flees DVA, or if the mother or child resists abuse and control (Jouriles & McDonald, 2015; McDonald et al., 2015; Newberry, 2017). In their systematic review of research on the relationship between animal cruelty and DVA Cleary et al. (2021) found animals are also subjected to abuse even after the human relationship has broken down. This review included research (33 articles, drawing on 30 different research studies) based entirely on adult report - adult victims, police, the reports of other professionals, and profiles of male perpetrators. In this systematic review there were no studies that involved direct research with children experiencing DVA was included and so their voice is largely absent.

Child survivors of DVA can be directly exposed to animal cruelty committed by domestic abuse perpetrators, with potentially harmful consequences (Cleary et al., 2021; McDonald et al., 2015; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). In a large representative sample of Norwegian youth (aged 12–16 years), 5% of adolescents reported that a parent or other adult in the home had been violent to a companion animal and found a high co-occurrence of this with other familial abuse. Exposure to animal cruelty can compound elevated risks of mental health and difficulty for children living with DVA (Silva et al., 2019; Cage et al., 2022). Parents reported that when their children witnessed animal abuse in the context of DVA, they were likely to be visibly distressed, and show behavioural challenges afterwards (McDonald et al., 2015). Newberry (2017) noted that children experiencing DVA were aware of threats to animals as a broader pattern of coercive control towards themselves and their mother and found that children's bond to animals was more likely to make them intervene to protect their pet, and consequently raised their own risk of physical injury.

Further, children might themselves be involved in animal abuse perhaps because violence directed to the animal was normalised in the family (McDonald et al., 2015).

Research on DVA and companion animal studies has explored professionals' views on the way that having a pet might influence victims' decision making. These studies all included survey and anecdotal data suggesting that many women are deterred from fleeing domestic abuse because of concerns about their pets (Giesbrecht, 2022; Stevenson et al., 2018), and that sometimes they returned to unsafe situations because of their concern about their animals' well-being and care (Stevenson et al., 2018). One recent study reported that some professionals were concerned about the distress that children experienced when they felt worried about their pets, and noted that children responded with anger and stress when they did not know what had happened to their animals (Giesbrecht, 2022).

Service providers in each of these studies commented on the need for pet friendly refuges/shelters and housing (Giesbrecht, 2022; Newberry, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2018). Studies based on service provider interviews and surveys recommended training to ensure that human oriented domestic abuse services understand the important role of pets in the context of DVA, and that animal welfare and health professionals be domestic abuse informed (Giesbrecht, 2022; Stevenson et al., 2018; Tiplady et al., 2015).

The literature on children, DVA, and the role of companion animals involves only minimal direct input from children and young people. As noted earlier, some of the studies include children's self-reporting of their exposure to animal cruelty and their relationship with their pet. Their experience of DVA itself, and of their own mental health is reported through parental assessment. As is common in this kind of research, the studies are relatively decontextualised to enable the evaluation of interacting variables; as a consequence, there is limited detail to explain why seemingly contradictory patterns of the impact of companion animals are in evidence. Qualitative research directly with children on their relationships with pets and their experiences of animal abuse in the context of DVA is extremely limited. It is this gap that this article aims to address.

In conclusion, whilst the use of companion animals as tools of coercive control against adult victims has been well established, the broader context of child-animal relationships in the context of DVA is less well understood. Child-focused studies have highlighted the impact of witnessing animal cruelty, and the potential for positive relationships with pets to mediate the impact of DVA on children's outcomes. However, these studies have rarely spoken directly to children, and their lived experience of relationships with pets in the context of DVA is not well documented. In this article, our aim is to address this gap in the literature, by

exploring how children living with DVA understand and experience their relationships with companion animals. It was anticipated that this would extend and potentially confirm (or challenge) the established literature in this area, that has predominately engaged with professionals.

Methods

The UNARS (Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies) study focused on children's experiences of coping with and managing DVA. It was a 4 nation (England, UK; Italy; Spain and Greece) multimethod study incorporating individual semi-structured interviews with children, photo elicitation, and drawings (family drawings, and home maps).

Participants

107 children between 8 and 18 were interviewed, by researchers across the 4 nations (21 England, 19 Greece, 43 Italy, and 24 Spain). children were recruited in a range of ways: in England they were accessed through a domestic abuse refuge, in Greece, through domestic abuse charities and residential facilities for children in care, in Italy, through clinical psychologists and legal services, and in Spain, through domestic abuse charities and police contacts. This produced a heterogenous sample of children. The main inclusion criteria were that children had lived in families where DVA had occurred, and that they were no longer in families impacted by domestic abuse at the time of interview. This paper is based on the subset of children who talked about the importance of companion animals in the interview. Of the 107 children participants, 22 talked about dogs, cats or other animals.

Context

Whilst multiple states in the USA have enacted the use of "Pet Protection Orders" (Randour et al., 2023), these are less established in other countries globally. In the UK, Greece, Italy and Spain, there is no parallel policy. Whilst such orders would allow Domestic Abuse Protection Orders to extend to companion animals, it does not necessarily widen options for the care of pets whilst in refuge or other residence where pets are not permitted. There are some local charities that offer foster services or other specialist support for the pets of those experiencing DVA, but this provision is often ad hoc, patchy and inconsistent in the four national locations included in this study.

Data Generation

Interviews were conducted within the services where children were recruited, in a quiet interview room or office. The multimethod data generation involved semi-structured interviews, and children were also invited to draw pictures if they wanted to, as part of that interview. In addition, children were invited to participate in a photo-elicitation based activity, where they were asked to take photos that captured their experiences of coping with DVA in their family. Children who chose to participate in the photo elicitation activity were invited to a second interview where they talked with researchers about the photos they brought with them to interviews. Data generation took place in safe places chosen in negotiation with the children themselves, and was informed by a feminist and children's rights-based approach (Burman, 2022), that focused on the wellbeing of the young participants, and supported them to make empowered choices about the stories they told and the way that they told them.

Interviews were conducted in the national language of the country in which they took place (Italian, Castillian Spanish, English and Greek, respectively). They were translated by a member of the research team proficient in English and the language of the interview, and were crosschecked by a second proficient bilingual team member.

Analysis

Researchers completed a reflexive journal immediately after each interview (see Appendix B) in which they captured their emotional responses and reflections. These were considered as the first step in data analysis and were subsequently read together with each interview transcript as part of the analytic process. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), informed by a constructionist and feminist theoretical lens. This approach framed our interpretation as co-constructed through our interaction with the data and our theoretical, analytic, and disciplinary resources (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We followed the stages of RTA as described by Braun and Clarke, framing this as an iterative and circular process, rather than a linear one. Data familiarisation involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, whilst listening to audio recordings. Early in the analysis, several members of the research team coded several interviews from the dataset independently before coming together to discuss and reflect on the codes that were being constructed. In these discussions, we explored how and why we were interpreting and labelling the data as we did. Different interpretations were discussed until consensus was reached. From these discussions, initial themes were identified. Through similar processes of

discussion and collaboration, these themes were reviewed and further developed as the analysis progressed, alongside further data generation. This produced a rich and complex analysis based on this extensive data set. Themes and sub-themes were then refined, defined, and named. This journal article is based on one of the themes.

Ethics

Ethical Approval was secured through the Ethics Committee of the principal investigator's university. The researchers were committed to the idea of consent as a process, and so sought affirmative engagement throughout the research process, checking in with participants before, throughout and after each research contact to ensure that they were content to continue to participate. The interviews focused on coping, but inevitably children sometimes described distressing issues, and researchers were sensitive to this, and responded by supporting participants to decide how and if they wished to proceed (e.g., asking if they wanted to stop entirely, take a short break, continue, or stop and reschedule). Researchers worked with domestic abuse support workers in the referring organisations to ensure follow up support was provided if needed. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the research, and were asked if they wanted to check transcripts of their interviews (No children opted to access their transcript). We ensured contacts were safe and suitably anonymised, and that any materials that went home with participants were not identifiably linked to domestic abuse research. We also ensured that child participants had an active safety plan and were supported by an involved professional (e.g., domestic abuse support worker, social worker, psychologist) who was aware of their participation. All data were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised, and care was taken to remove or pseudonymise all details that might make the individuals identifiable.

Findings

Data analysis produced 6 themes which express the role of animals in the family in situations of DVA: Part of the Family, Control and abuse, Caring for animals, Comfort and Safety, Listening for support, and Disruption uncertainty and loss.

Part of the Family

Children were asked to bring photos or draw pictures that captured their sense of family. Children who talked about their pets sometimes incorporated their pets into the family drawings (see Fig. 1), describing them clearly as part of the

Fig. 1 I care about animals, and I run away from arguments



family group. They also often brought photos of cats and dogs in the photo-voice activities, framing them as part of their relational support network:

Josh (9, UK, describes his drawing): Kevin, my mum, my brother and my dog, my other dog Toby.

Rosa (Italy, 11): Is me; my little cousin; my cat and my cousin; my sister; my best friend; my dog;

Sabrina (Italy, 16). I live with my father, Carlo, mother Linda and Sara and Andrea, my brothers... and wait! there is also Whisky, my dog!

Dogs and cats are described here in lists alongside other family members – each named, and imbued with a sense of personhood and relationality. This hints at the significance of these animals in children's everyday lives. They are in drawings and talk about home, suggesting an importance in children's place-based meaning making. They are present in photos of important events and celebrations, indicating that they are part of family gatherings. Dogs and cats are positioned as relational beings, important and meaningful in family life.

Even where cats and dogs are not actually living in the family home, they can still occupy an important place in family life. For example, Oliver's family are not allowed a pet, because of landlord rules, but they have a regular feline

visitor. Oliver devoted five photos to this important figure in his photovoice activity.

Oliver (12, UK): That's the cat. Yeah, I think there's five shots ((photos)) but I think the last one's the best one. I did it yesterday, I think... He always comes in and he don't come in just for food because we don't really have cat food, so we can't like give him anything. He comes in just to like just stay for a bit.

It is clearly very important to Oliver that the cat is not 'just coming for food' but rather *likes to visit*, and chooses to stay, because he feels a connection to the family. In this way, Oliver emphasises the relational significance of the cat. He goes on to say:

Oliver: (When the cat comes round) Good things happen, I don't know why. Good things happen every time he comes, I don't know why. I don't understand. ... I don't know, like my mum will get a call about her work, like how she's been doing well and stuff and like she just gets lucky stuff, like she just gets – and when bad things happen, like the car, like it broke down once and then he came in. Then later he ((the mechanic)) called and he said like we've got another car for you and stuff like that. And like she just – it's

just luck when he comes in, for some reason... I think it's a sign that when he comes in, something's going to happen; that something good's going to happen when he comes in because usually we get something nice when he comes in.

Oliver positions him as the family's "lucky cat", a symbol of things going right for them – important in a family where things have often been very difficult. In this way, the cat is described as occupying a special position in family life, a bringer of wellbeing, and a force of healing.

By describing their animals as 'part of the family', children could convey how important pets can be as relational beings in the household. They are part of children's relational networks, and as we will see in the following themes, they are also important sources of self-worth, care, and support.

Caring for Animals

Some of the young participants used phrases like "I love animals" and "I care for animals" to describe themselves – often characterising this and their care for their brothers or sisters as sources of positive identity for themselves (see also ANONYMISED., 2016). These descriptions underscore the importance of family pets in children's lives as sources of relationship, support and care, and responsibility. For example, Elda (12, Spain) says:

Umm. ...and I, ((hesitates)) I like looking after my pets.

Caring for animals is also part of their sense of self-identity. For instance, when asked to say a little about herself, Nancy (10, UK) described herself in relation to her family position and role, and as someone who cares for animals:

I'm the youngest, I'm the scariest. I love animals, I run away from arguments so I don't get hurt.

This significance of herself as the youngest, and as animal lover is emphasised in her family drawing.

Caring well for animals is an important source of pride for these children, and stands in stark contrast to the abusive relationships and violence that characterise other aspects of family life. Domestic abuse disrupts family relationships, and domestic abuse perpetrators often directly target the bond between mothers and children in families, by undermining women's capacity to parent (Lapierre, 2008). In contrast, pets offer an important source of relationship, closeness and bonding, that allows children to maintain

some kind of relational network, despite abuse. For example, Rebecca (12, UK) described her close bond with her little dog Wilma:

When we first got her, she was a bit like of a mess and everything because I don't think her previous owner looked after her that much because the previous owner was like a traveller, so she used to just like live in a yard. And she was really dirty when we got her and everything, and then my mum put her in the back garden, and I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know whether we got the dog or not and I looked out in the back garden and opened the door, and I was like, "Here doggy," and she tried to climb up the wall to try and get to my bedroom and she was barking and everything. It was really funny ((laughs)).

Caring for Wilma offers an outlet for Rebecca to enact care and compassion. It also enables her to care for an animal that, like herself, is in need of love and nurture. Wilma is a vulnerable dog, in need of care, and Rebecca clearly recognises that need. A similar experience is described by Andy:

Andy (12, UK): And then down the street there was a man that used to hit this dog and tie him up to a tree. One day he ran away and came to me and my mum. And we looked after him. And then he went back and the next morning he came and then just went back again, and then before we left, he never came back... And then we looked at the house he used to get hit at, and he wasn't there either... I think they killed him.

Like Rebecca, Andy seems to identify with the dog, as another victim of abusive behaviour. The dog ran away to be cared for but returned home several times, before eventually disappearing. Andy's characterisation of him as having been killed might be catastrophic thinking, and perhaps a little overblown, but this perhaps also reflects some of his own fears about his own abusive father. In Rachel's case, the recognition of what it's like as a person and as a dog to feel scared is palpable:

Rachel (11, UK): We'd take all the dogs up cos the dogs would be like scared, you'd hear like, once my brother nearly got hurt because my mum and dad were shouting and our dogs, especially Ginger, ran upstairs and slammed into the bookcase and he was trying to like hide and... the bookcase fell down... He was SCARED of the fighting cos he was like quite used to it, he done it quite a lot, the dog would like try and run into our room, hide under the bed, he'd be shaking, he wouldn't come out, you'd be saying to him, "Come on,

come on," he wouldn't move, he'd just be sitting there staring at you.

Here, Rachel describes herself caring about the emotional wellbeing of her dogs, and trying her best to keep them safe. The dog's fear seems familiar to her – the sense is of it being part of the everyday experience of home for her, and for Ginger. The scene with the bookcase is narrated in a way that conveys chaos and confusion, and intense fear, and it seems likely that this reflects her own state of mind, as well as the experience of her dog. She is able to describe in detail the fear the dog experienced, detailing all the signs of her fear.

In 'Caring for animals' we have detailed how child described reciprocal relationships with animals – both in their home, and those who 'visited'. In these relationships, children were able to express their caring identities in relation to other beings, outside the relational control imposed by abusive dynamics within the household. Caring for vulnerable animals seemed to permit them to enact a care for the hurt and distressed that was not always available to the children themselves when they were upset and frightened. At the same time, they received care from these animals too, and as we will explore in the following two themes, the animals offered them comfort and support and a sense of being heard.

Comfort and Safety

Children and young people's accounts of their relationships with animals made it clear that they derived considerable comfort and a sense of safety from their relationship with them.

Paul (9, UK): When they were barking, when they could hear people coming up the stairs. And we were volunteering, [we were]¹

George (11, UK): [He was overprotective, so that was the problem.

Paul: we were volunteering to look after, to look after Freddy. We really wanted to have Fred.

George: If I had Freddy... Freddy is really furry and soft. And on his fur he has, not like a cross, but like a triangle shape.

There are several components here to the sense of security the brothers derive from their dog, Freddy, who remained with their father. His barking would alert them to potential danger, and George sees his dog as protective. These descriptions of Freddy are full of longing for a lost companion.

¹ [indicates overlapping speech.



Fig. 2 a Ginger, the hamster



Fig. 3 "My cat always seems to be there and sits with me. At night, I sometimes get nightmares, but when she's in my room, I don't."

George's description of the texture and detail of his fur conveys a particular closeness and intimate knowledge of the dog. George's description of his fur suggests a more tactile source of comfort. Many children talked about stroking their dogs or cats, and the special connection they had with them (Figs. 2, 3, 4):

Emma (17, UK): Basically when I was – I have them pets now but when I was going through all that, I had two gerbils. And just having them, sometimes, like when you're feeling a like, oh my God, all stressed out and something, you just – when you stroke pets or whatever you do, just play with them, we used to them in all the little hamster balls and stuff like that, so they'd run around the living room; and just watch them. I don't know, it's just relaxing in some way. Having pets back then and now helped a lot with my stress and depression, still now having a pet helps, like my cat Smudge and my hamster Ginger. Stroking them gives me a sense of relief and always calmed me down. Every now and again I still get down and emotional but when this happens, my cat always seems to

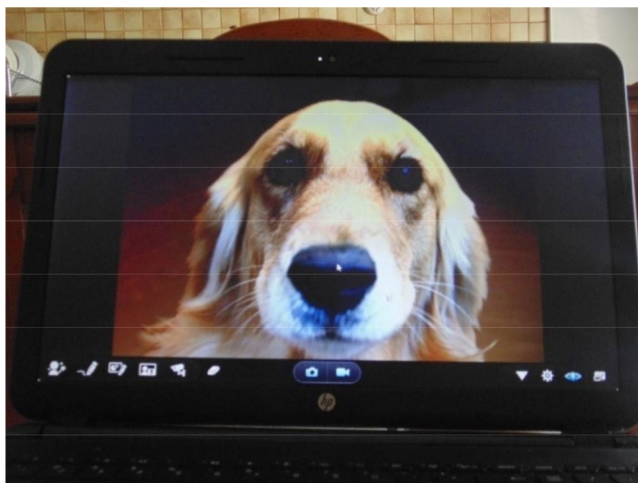


Fig. 4 Anna's dog

be there and sits with me. At night, I sometimes get nightmares, but when she's in my room, I don't. Some people may only see them as pets, but to me, they are like family and therapy.

Stroking and playing with her animals offered Emma an important release from the everyday stress of living with DVA. Several of the children seemed to suggest that there was something inherently calming or relaxing about just being round their animals. This was echoed by Oliver (12, UK):

We usually always like – we usually always like stroke him because we all like him. At first my mum was angry about him, and my brother was angry about the cat always coming in. But like he couldn't help it because he would always sprint at me – he used to like follow me everywhere and I let him in one day and then he wouldn't stop coming back every day. He would have like stayed for like twenty-five minutes and he'd always come back again. One day, he came in the house like four times in one day.

It is clear in this extract that Oliver derives something positive from two aspects of his relationship with the visiting cat – first, the sense of his special connection to him, and also the safe predictability of his return. It is almost as if Oliver recognises his own loveability in the affection the cat offers him. Oliver also knows that he can rely on his feline visitor.

Animals are seen as safe relational beings for children – as reliable, non-abusive, and loving. Having said that she does not see relationships with other humans in her future, Lisa (16, Italy) jokingly says that her vision of her future is:

Alone with the cats (laughs) Because I love cats....

Whilst this is clearly drawing on the 'cat lady' trope, Lisa is also making a serious point – that for children who have experienced the challenges of DVA, the dependability and unconditional love offered by animals is reassuring.

In his photovoice interview, George offers a surprisingly mature account for the comfort and connection we feel from our companion animals:

George: And you know what's one good thing, when you have a dog with you, you release a chemical in them. It's called oxytocin, that's what it's called, and you know when a baby's born and a mum hugs its baby and the mum gives a chemical, it's oxytocin. That makes them feel warm inside, and happy. Yeah. ((laughs)) It makes them feel happy because like dogs get the feeling as well, and some people say dogs have no feelings but when the dog releases oxytocin, like any type of dog but especially female dogs, when they release it, they think you're as their own pup, and that's a good thing... There's one that's adrenalin and there's one, when you have adrenalin, if you fall, you don't feel any pain because it blocks out the pain.

It is interesting that in this extract George has positioned the dog in almost a proxy parental relationship. Not only does it matter to him that he is close to and comforted by the dog, but perhaps more importantly, the dog loves *him*, unconditionally, like she would love her own puppy. The love of the dog is seen as being linked to both the bonding hormone oxytocin, but also the telling of the oxytocin story brings to mind to the idea of hormones that block the experience of pain, perhaps signalling the dog as a source of both comfort and relief from pain and distress. The sense of his dog therefore *buffering pain* is also obliquely described here. This is a remarkably sophisticated account of the human-animal relationship, for a child of George's age, suggesting that he has given a lot of thought to the role of his dogs in his life. This again underscores the importance of this relationship for him.

Describing her experience in refuge, after fleeing domestic abuse, Rebecca reflects similarly:

It feels quite different cos you're used to having, when you're asleep you're used to having loads of dogs on your feet and you can't move and they're nicking ((stealing)) all your cover and stuff like that but now you can sleep and like sometimes cos Malcolm still sleeps in the same bed as me, you can feel like his feet and you're thinking it's the dog so you try and kick it ((laughs)) and Malcolm wakes up and he's like, "What

are you doing?” I was like, “Oh, sorry, I thought you were the dog.” It’s quite funny.

Having “loads of dogs on your feet” is a comforting, nostalgic experience for Rebecca. It contrasts with her current experience of the shelter, which she has elsewhere described as an unsettling space in which she does not feel particularly safe (Callaghan et al, 2016a). This suggests that the fond memory of the dogs all over the bed is one she associates with security, a positive reminder of feeling safe. With the heavy sensation of the dogs on her feet, she can rest, and sleep.

Listening and Support

The children we spoke to identified animals as an important source of support, and a ‘listening’ ear. The tactile sense of comfort and support offered by a furry, cuddly animal is perhaps obvious, but children also reported feeling comforted by less cuddly pets and animals too:

Int Yeah? You said you could just calm down, did it feel calmer in the garden?

Andy (12, UK) Yeah. Because we used to have some pets and I could just go and sit with them and play with them... I had a tortoise.

Andy described going out to the garden as a coping mechanism, to help him calm down when arguments were occurring in the house. It was not just being outdoors, or out of the way of the fighting that was calming, though. He identifies his pet tortoise as the source of calming. Playing with the tortoise in the garden gave him a focus and company that enabled him to self-soothe, despite the adult fighting indoors. Slightly less cuddly animals were also a focus of Lizzy’s interactions with a friend, when she visited to avoid conflict at home:

Lizzy (14, UK): Yeah, I was quite lonely.

Int: Could you ever have friends round or?

Lizzy: No, not really. (.) Cos sometimes they’d just argue and argue and argue, so if I did have, I was playing out with my friends I’d go round the balcony, climb over theirs, and into Kim’s to play with Kim, and we used to collect snails and look after them ((laughs)). I used to just come out and go over, but that was like in the afternoon, that was when I like, felt most safe, in the afternoon.

Although snails might not be an obvious choice of support animal, they gave the children a structuring activity to collaborate on, and ‘caring’ for another being is itself a source

of comfort and calm. It does not seem accidental that tortoises and snails are slow moving creatures, that carry their own home securely around with them on their backs. They are symbols of being itinerant but homed. Loneliness and isolation are common experiences for child survivors of domestic abuse, as is feeling unsafe in their own homes, or often “on the move” (Alexander et al., 2015). The connection to snails and tortoises enabled them to maintain some sense of relationship and undermined the isolation they were experiencing. Lizzy also described playing hide and seek with her dog:

Lizzy: Yeah, I used to play hide and seek with my dog ((smiles), I had a dog ... And we used to play hide and seek, and I used to hide it and then pretend that I couldn’t find it, and then he’d go woof, woof, and I’d go, “Oh, I found you,” ((laughs)).

The dog here is a playmate, a source of happiness and play, who undermines the sense of loneliness and isolation that she experienced. She describes this as a repetitive and predictable game, that offers a reassuringly reliable interaction, between her and her dog. It is highly interactional, suggesting a sense of ‘doing together’. Rachel (12, UK) also described how her dog enabled her to feel less isolated and alone during difficult times:

Well like because sometimes when I didn’t have Bette, I used to be – I just like sat in my bedroom, doing nothing all day. But then when I’ve got her there, I don’t feel so alone. So that’s really nice to have someone there.

Bette is not ‘just a dog’ – she is a companion, someone who breaks her loneliness. There’s a sense here that having the pet there is not somehow inferior to having a person there – she “has someone there”, a conscious being, a friend. She’s ‘doing nothing’, but through her interaction with her canine companion, she is actively engaged. She is ‘doing something’ with her dog.

One of the reasons children become isolated in families impacted by domestic abuse is related to the perception that their experiences are not normal and are stigmatising. This perception is often sustained by the secrecy abusers tend to impose on families in relation to the abuse (Callaghan et al., 2017). This means children often find it hard to talk to people about what is happening in their family. In this context, animals offer an important outlet for their disclosures. Anna (12, Greece) uses her relationship with street cats and dogs to express herself in relation to the abuse in the family:

Let's move on to the next picture which is my favourite. I took it through the computer. Because I like little dogs and animals, particularly... If I have something inside me, I mean a secret, I go outside, I take it for a walk and, uh, I speak to him ((the dog))... Basically, let's say, like that problem that I have with my family. I share it with the doggie ((laughs)) Even though he doesn't speak... A doggie in the neighbourhood and kittens and uh, because they live in the back, in the back of, back of our apartment building, ((uh)) I go in the back and sit ((laughs)). With the kittens [...] And it's very nice. And uh I say all my thoughts, from inside. The family issues. It helps me to be, to, because I have these inside, in my mind... And, it's that the dog - and the cats, and the rest of the animals help me, ((it's)) like I get it off my chest to a friend of mine. And trust her.

For Anna, the dogs and cats are trusted friends with whom she can share her 'family secrets', thoughts and feelings. It does not matter to her that the dog 'doesn't speak'. She can speak to him, and feel heard. Her laughs and the way she jumps in to say "even though he doesn't speak" suggest that she might feel embarrassed to admit talking to the dogs and cats, as if she is concerned other people might criticise her for seeking comfort and a listening ear in animals. She simultaneously minimises her relationship with the dogs and cats, and imbues it with significance, by bringing this 'favourite' photo and telling the story.

Several of the children talked about disclosing difficult things to their dogs and cats, when they couldn't talk about to other people. For instance, Andy described his pets as "safe company". Rachel's dog Bette is clearly a close companion, on whom she feels she can rely:

She's like got me through things because like she's really well trained and I feel like I can talk to her. Like sometimes she actually talks back, like she barks every time I say something... She knows how to play hide and seek and everything... It's really funny. And like in my old house, she used to share my bedroom, like she'd have her own little corner and stuff, and like sometimes when I was a bit upset, I used to go into my bedroom, sit on the bed and she'd know that I was upset, so she'd come and like curl up next to me and everything. And yeah, I love her.

In this extract, Bette is imbued with many qualities often associated with human companions: she listens, she 'talks back', she is 'funny' and she can play. She also offers emotional support, and is responsive to Rachel's distress. When she curls up next to Rachel, it is not just a physical closeness

– Rachel sees this as an indication that her distress has been heard and understood by the dog, and that the dog is *offering* emotional support. She is dependable, always there for Rachel, a reliable, stable emotional support in an often-turbulent family. George similarly describes his dog as interacting and understanding him:

George: Dogs are best friends.

Int: What makes them such good friends?

G: One, they understand because if you have a dog and you see it, like if you see a dog look at you and tilt its head, it's when they know how you feel.

Particularly interesting here is how tuned in George is to the dog's communication; he is able to read the body language of the dog, and gives meaning to his gestures. This makes it clear that there is a reciprocity to his exchange with his dog. He is a 'best friend' who 'knows how you feel'. On the one hand children describe how they give care to their animals, but it is also clear that experience care in return. This is echoed by Nancy:

Nancy (9): I can talk to my animals, and in a way, I think I can understand 'em. It's like, when they reply to stuff I say with their thingymajigs, twitching and noise... and and their noises, I think I can understand them, which makes me think they're saying stuff about it, saying "stay strong, be brave" and I say "Thank you", and I say stuff like that for them helping me.

Children in the interviews described close and reciprocal relationships with the dogs, cats and other animals that they loved. These were relationships in which children both offered *and* received care and love. As Nancy states, she feels they understand her, and she understands them. They offer her support and encouragement, in a family where that often seemed to be lacking. The existence of a mutual bond is perhaps what made these relationships so important to children. Lass-Hennemann et al. (2022) found that people who were distrustful of other humans often have stronger attachments to their pets. The bond to animals might therefore be particularly important in families where love can often feel conditional and where abusive relational dynamics mean human relationships often come 'with strings' (Peled, 2000).

In this theme, we have explored the importance of interactions with pets and other animals as relational beings who children feel can *hear* their experiences, particularly their experiences of DVA. For children, talking to other people about violence and abuse can be very difficult (Callaghan et al., 2017). Animals, on the other hand, are safe for children to talk to; they keep secrets, they do not disclose things to others, and they offer a supportive, listening ear to children.

Control and Abuse

Whilst children and young people can often experience animals as supportive and comforting, there is a more challenging aspect for children who experience domestic abuse. Research with adult survivors and professionals has suggested that pets are often used as tools of coercion and are also directly abused by domestic abuse perpetrators (Newberry, 2017). Our interviews focused on coping with DVA, we did not explicitly ask children about direct experiences of violence and abuse, and consequently we do not have specific examples of animal maltreatment described in previous literature. Nonetheless, the children in our interviews did demonstrate an awareness of such threats and violence. For example, Emma noted:

Emma (17, UK): And when we was leaving the house and like we had to leave the gerbils there for a little while, he said, "If you don't take the gerbils, I'm going to run them over." ... He generally just hated animals.

Int: So when you left, you had to leave the gerbils there.

Emma: Yeah.

Int: And then you went back for them.

Emma: Yeah, we had to give them to my friend to look after until we got our refuge, and then we got them back, and then we had them for a little while because they had survived until they was like five years old, which is really odd for gerbils (laughs).

The exchange Emma reported here took place at the point she and her mother were fleeing. The threat to kill Emma's gerbils is clearly part of the father/perpetrator's attempt to intimidate and control. Because Emma and her mother could not take the animals into the shelter with them, they had to be left behind, and his threat to kill Emma's gerbils is therefore particularly cruel. Despite this frightening threat, her care for her animals was consistent, and she was able to quickly find a temporary home for them with a friend. Caring for them despite the perpetrator's threats might be seen as 'keeping them alive' – they survived to a ripe old age. Nonetheless, this incident illustrates how pets can be used to extend abuse; had she not been able to find a temporary carer, Emma would have been left worrying about her pets throughout her time in refuge.

Abusive incidents were sometimes obliquely referenced, but children also told us more subtle stories of the use of pets as a tool of control and abuse, rather than overt incidences of violence. For example, after brothers Paul and George were removed from their father's custody, he lost the right to unsupervised access to the boys. However, he used the boys' affection for their lost dogs to bypass this:

Paul (9, UK): because our dad kept coming here and he wasn't allowed, we always got to see our puppy because one of our dogs gave birth to one puppy, and we wanted to see it... then he went away. I wanted to see our little dog! Because like possibly in about two months, I'd move house and I wanted to keep him.

It is quite explicit here that this was a contact violation, and that the father had brought the puppy to show the boys despite the order in place that banned him from having contact. This is a clear manipulation of the boys' love for a favourite dog and their earnest desire to see the dog's puppies – a breach of the order that would be very hard for both the mother and the boys to resist.

Disruption, Uncertainty and Loss

For many of our child participants, fleeing domestic abuse meant loss and disruption. They left behind friends, belongings, and several also had to leave behind their companion animals. This was experienced as a core aspect of the losses they experienced. For example, Tina (10, UK) and her family had to leave very suddenly, and fled to a different county overnight:

Int: That sounds difficult that you had to move in the same night, what was it like for you?

Tina: Horrible, awkward, disturbing, ((.)) sad, cos I lost loads, all of my, loads of my stuff, and my animals.

Int: You left your animals as well?

Tina: ((umm)), they got sold.

Int: Did they?

Tina: I got Tyra still.

Int: Who's Tyra?

Tina: My doggy. I had, we had the other one, Pinky who was related to her in a way, but mum sold Pinky cos they kept, the dogs kept fighting.

Int: Who was related to who?

Tina: Pinky was related to Tyra, in a brother-sister way I think. Tyra's a girl, and I think Pinky was too.

Int: What did it feel like to leave your animals behind?

Tina: Upsetting, cos I loved my animals. It just felt horrible having to say bye to them, cos it felt like half of me went missing that night.

The grief is palpable in Tina's first comments on the loss of her animals. She uses the strongest terms she seems able to find – "horrible, awkward, disturbing" "I lost loads, all of my, loads of my stuff" to emphasise the intensity of the rupture she experienced. Her feeling that "half of me went missing that night" is another intense statement of rupture that signals the importance of this loss of her animals to her

sense of herself and belonging. The loss of animals when fleeing domestic abuse also signalled to many children and young people the loss of a sense of home and safety.

Several children told us that they worried about their animals when they were in refuge, and regretted that they were not permitted to have animals there. Talking about his fish, Ben said:

Ben: They're still at my home, they're probably, most of 'em are already dead... cos there's only like three left and we didn't get to clean the tank out or anything whilst we were trying to get here.

Int: So you had to leave them behind?

Ben: Yeah, cos you're not, you're not allowed pets in here.

The fish had been Ben's first pets, and were bought for him by his father. Their loss is described in a matter-of-fact manner, that reflects the choicelessness of leaving them behind ("you're not allowed pets in here"). Whilst it is understandable that safety of the adult and child victims needs to be put first, nonetheless the experience of pet loss that children described to us was one of choicelessness and loss of agency, as well as loss of a beloved pet; the loss was imposed without any other possibility available to the child. They had no say in what happened to their pets: they were sold, given away, left behind, or allowed to die. In some cases, as in Ben's, the child is not even sure what has happened to their pets. The loss of pets is another relevant part of a sense of the *symbolic rupture* (Zittoun, 2007) that fleeing domestic abuse represented for children, in addition to be forced to leave their belonging, homes, schools, community and friends behind, often without being able to say goodbye. Although their past life might have been unsafe and full of physical, social and psychological conflict, it was nonetheless familiar to them. The loss of pets symbolises the loss of some aspects of everyday life, as well as the auguring of new things that might become 'everyday' with time. To manage their transition from their life before leaving to their new life, children need to draw on new symbolic and relational resources to navigate the changes, and to construct the new 'stories of self' that will help them move forward. Transitioning from one way of life to another also includes the substitution of one place with its known physicality, sociality and psychological meaning structure with another, perhaps when the child feels less able to muster the resources to navigate them. As we have previously described, pets often were seen as sources of support, warmth and comfort through the challenges of living with domestic abuse as well as a confirmation of self-worth and pride in self-reliance. Leaving them behind meant that children had to

rebuild their life post-abuse without a beloved animal on whom they had previously relied.

George: He's a companion. He just follows you. He's fun because sometimes he goes to me, then to Paul, then to our dad, then to me again, and then to Paul... He's favourites with Dad.

Paul: He's favourites with Dad.

George: When he was young, he slept on his shoulder.

Int: So is Lou still with your Dad. Do you get to see him much?

George: No.

Paul: Never.

Rarely at a loss for words, George and Paul almost always gave extensive responses to questions they were asked. The abrupt and absolute 'no' and 'never' is a remarkable reply for them, perhaps signalling the incisive nature of the losses they felt around their pets. Interestingly these were also intertwined in their interviews with representations of their father. They told us that their mother had removed all photos of their father from the images they brought us in the photovoice interview:

Paul: But our mum said, "Don't put any pictures of Dad", for some reason. I don't know why.

Int: Mum didn't want those photos.

Paul: No.

Int: Did you want them?

George: Yeah, but she said we couldn't. I wanted to show the one with our puppy when we first got it, Eliza, that's the one who gave birth to seven dogs, and she was well cute when she was small. She was about that small.

But they did bring pictures of their fathers' dogs and cat. The animals here seem to represent not only something lost in their story of self, but also a sense of rupture in their family lives, and a symbol that connects them to that past. It is acceptable to talk about pets; it is not so acceptable (at least within the family) to talk about their often-ambivalent relationship with their father.

Despite the experience many children shared of having to leave behind or give away loved animals when fleeing domestic abuse, nonetheless some were able to retain a connection to them beyond that of memory. This offered an important sense of joy, comfort and continuity. This is evident in this extract from Rebecca, talking about seeing her dog Wilma:

Rebecca: she does smile ((laugh)). She's really funny. I've got better pictures of her... I used to like – I used

to text my mum when I was in school, saying, “Bring Wilma up to the school so I can walk her back home.” And she used to, it was really funny. We used to take her over the park and everything.

Int: That’s really nice. So even though you’ve had to move and stuff, it’s nice that you still get to see Wilma, isn’t it?

Rebecca: Yeah. Like if I had to let go of Wilma like I did to my other two dogs, I don’t know what I’d do. I love Wilma so much. Even though I’ve had the boys longer, I have more of like a connection with Wilma, like I love her to bits.

And then later, she says:

Rebecca: I love her so much (both laugh).... When we get like a house, then we’re going to have her back then. It’s just while we’re in refuge.

Pets represent home and stability, comfort and love to many children impacted by domestic abuse. They offer the possibility of giving love and care, of sharing secrets, of being in the moment together. This is the case both in their memories of their past, in which their pets helped them feel safe and loved, and in their visions of the future, in which they represent new homes and new beginnings. In this quote from Rebecca, it seems almost unthinkable to her that she would not get her dog back - “we’re going to have her back”, “I love her so much”.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted that thinking about pets as part of the family encompass broader and more complex and subtle emotional and relational issues related to their relevance in children’s lived experience before and after fleeing DVA. Our research has shown that children have strong relational bonds with their companion animals, who they see as an important source of emotional support, comfort and safety. This provides evidence to support the speculation that companion animals might play a role in building resilience (Gilligan, 2000). It also traced a line between general population studies that suggest children benefit from the emotional support pets offer during adversity (Cassels et al., 2017), to show how specifically children impacted by domestic abuse may benefit from their relationships with their companion animals.

The human-animal bond can begin early in life and can be particularly strong for children. In the context of DVA, this bond assumes an even greater importance as victims live in constant and intense stress and fear both before and after fleeing. Often it is their pets who can make them feel safe, cared

for, and protected. Pets can help healing, provide an ongoing and safe source of comfort, love, and support for adult and child survivors. We also know how relationships with pets can enhance our grief, trauma and loss responses when ruptures in everyday life have occurred. As we have shown, pets can also embody a positive model of caring for children, a chance to give and receive love and to develop trust. Such trusting and unconditionally loving relationships can be lacking in the everyday life of children living with domestic abuse, and it is important that such bonds are maintained and supported when adult and child survivors leave abusive relationships.

The accounts of children we have presented in this paper contributes further weight to research that has suggested that pets and their importance to children can be weaponised as an additional way to control, intimidate, and blackmail both child and adult victim/survivors (Newberry, 2017). Lack of institutional protection for pets can hence further victimise young and adult victims who care and worry about their pets left behind, especially if left with perpetrators.

Pet abuse is one of the forms of DVA included in many risk assessment tools used for victims of DVA, and is associated with increased risk of significant violence (Walton-Moss et al. 2005). A clear and persistent association between animal abuse and the perpetration of physical and psychological violence has been consistently found in literature (Newberry, 2017.).

Unfortunately, pet abuse can often be part of both living with DVA, and the post-separation, legal and custody abuse that perpetrators inflict on their victims when they try to escape (Stevenson et al., 2018). Our research adds weight to arguments that inadequate support for pets may act as a barrier to leaving and staying out of abusive relationships (Stevenson et al., 2018; Giesbrecht, 2022).

Indeed, not only do both child and adult DVA survivors have to abruptly sever their bonds with their home, friends and community when seeking shelter, they also still worry about their own safety and that of their family. At the same time, they also worry about the safety and wellbeing of their pets. This was particularly poignant for the young survivors we interviewed in this study, as evidenced by their spontaneous and extensive reference to pets and animals through interviews and photovoice. Because that bond is so strong and so important, many adult survivors will risk further victimization by delaying seeking shelter, and/or by returning to an abusive partner, out of concern that their partners may harm their pets.

The implications of this work are important, not just in making visible children’s experiences, but in signalling the concerns that professionals need to consider when children who experience DVA talk about their experiences. Building on past literature which has explored the connection between DVA and animal abuse (Stevenson et al., 2018), the current study points to the need for meaningful

partnerships and cross-training among DVA services and advocates, animal shelters, and animal rights activists and control officers. This moves the concern with children in situations of DVA into new areas of work, like animal rights welfare, which requires fuller consideration. Taking this line of argument further, it should be considered whether pets should be included on DVA protection and custody orders, to offer protection both to the human victim / survivors and to the animals. In addition, our findings have implications for refuges, and for social housing policy. As far as possible, domestic abuse shelters should be welcoming of pets, and should work closely with animal welfare organisations to enable alternative care for survivors' pets. The issue of pet ownership should also be considered in relation to the provision of broader accessible housing for victim / survivors. Resourcing such initiatives should be an important consideration for policy, particularly in a sector that is already underfunded and under-resourced. It can be easy in strapped socio-economic conditions to dismiss pets as an unaffordable luxury, but our interviews with children suggest that in fact pets are 'part of the family' for many children, and ignoring their needs can potentially be a barrier both to safety and to recovery after domestic abuse.

There is clear value in recognising the possible role of pets in recovery from domestic abuse, and professionals supporting children after domestic abuse should consider relationships with pets as one of the potential relational resources children have available. It also highlights a potential value in exploring animal-assisted activities and interactions with animals, as part of therapeutic planning for children who have an affinity with animals. Acknowledging and taking into account former children-pets relations and also promoting the formation of new ones could help professionals further explore and address children's emotional and relational needs in their new life conditions. Multi-disciplinary teams including DVA and animal care-shelter organizations professionals could play an important role in consulting and implementing interventions based on the protective and therapeutic value of children-animals interaction period.

Strengths and limitations.

This paper is one of the first to work directly with children's accounts of domestic abuse to understand the role that companion animals play for child victim/ survivors of domestic abuse. However, it is important to note that the data here is drawn from a larger study about children's coping with domestic abuse, and that interviews were not specifically focused on companion animals. In some senses this might be regarded as a strength, since it means that the theme was raised by children themselves, and not by the researchers. However, it also means that at times, opportunities were missed to explore further with children the meaning of animals in their lives, and in their experience of

DVA. A bespoke study focused specifically on this would enable a fuller exploration of children's perspectives and experiences.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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