

*An Invitation to Travel—
Destination:*

Creating Caring Communities

By Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D.



Writing this article is similar to taking a journey. On this journey, I am both the traveler and the tour guide. You, the readers, are also important travelers on the journey the Doris Day Animal Foundation is taking—a journey leading to “Creating Caring Communities.” We invite you to continue this journey with us because without you, we cannot accomplish our goal.

First is a brief review of where we have been and a snapshot of one of the places this journey to “Creating Caring Communities” is taking us.

In a previous issue (Spring 2004, “The Evolution of the Beyond Violence Program”), we talked about going “beyond violence,” that is, focusing on the big picture—a picture that includes not just important information and guidance about “the violence connection,” but also looks at “the empathy connection.” DDAF is convinced that the key to solving the problem of animal cruelty and indifference to the welfare of animals is to help people understand that animal welfare and human welfare are inextricably linked. It is now common knowledge that cruelty to animals is linked to other forms of violence, particularly family violence. Moreover, those children who abuse animals are at risk for continuing to behave aggressively and violently.

In fact, a twenty-year longitudinal study of 4,000 boys, known as the Pittsburgh study, found that cruelty to animals and people was one of the factors associated with the persistence of delinquent and criminal behavior. This is a very important finding, because the study was prospective—that is, it interviewed elementary school-aged boys and followed them for twenty years. (This is in contrast to retrospective studies, which interview people at a certain age, usually adults, and ask them questions about themselves when they were younger. Because retrospective studies rely on recollection, they are a weaker predictor.)

Why is this finding important? Most importantly, how will it help animals? And how can it help children and families? People in positions of influence who make policy about what kind of resources the police will get, or the educational programs that will get funded, or the types of community programs that will be priorities often have to base their decision on findings from reliable research. They need to know as many facts about their decisions as possible, and one way to get dependable facts is by conducting well-designed studies.

Even though many people who work closely with animal and family welfare are convinced of the signifi-

cance of animal cruelty, policy makers do not necessarily share this conviction. In the late 1980s, there was considerable concern about the dramatic increase in youth violence. As a result, the government funded a number of research studies and evaluated prevention and intervention programs. This well-coordinated and funded effort to produce reliable information on youth violence succeeded. The latest information shows that youth violence is on the decrease. Following the youth violence model, DDAF seeks to influence a similar decrease in incidences of animal cruelty in the coming decades by providing solid information to policy makers and program developers.



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The Pittsburgh study makes it clear to all that animal cruelty is a behavior that must be addressed as early as possible, with well-designed, effective and consistent interventions. That means there needs to be an increase in the reporting of animal cruelty, its investigation and prosecution, and the punishment it receives. It also leads to the question: are there any effective intervention or prevention programs? If not, what is being done about it? This study gives a valuable tool for activists to take to their local community to argue for the necessary policies and services that this study implies are needed.

One step in this direction of providing information on animal cruelty and human welfare to policy makers and program developers is the DDAL initiative to effect a change in the Federal

Bureau of Investigation’s crime data collection reporting system. Thanks to the leadership of Congressman Chris Van Hollen from Maryland, and Frank Wolf of Virginia, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary, there is language in the House Appropriations Bill that speaks to the FBI about including animal cruelty as a separate category in the agency’s data collection program.

Building on this success, the DDAF Creating Caring Communities campaign has identified federally sponsored research that could provide important tools and evidence to activists at the local, state, and federal level. Sometimes there are databases with important information about animal cruelty, but the data has not

been analyzed with that in mind. Taking the Pittsburgh study again as an example, we would like to know, and could find out by a secondary analysis of the data, at what age animal cruelty is most likely to begin. Potentially, we might determine if there is any particular developmental course of animal cruelty. Does it start out with small animals, then cross species? Is there a difference between harm to pets and harm to unknown animals? What factors are associated with animal cruelty? Does a parent's education or background make a difference? If the behavior of animal cruelty stops, what factors are associated with its cessation? It could be possible to identify a small number of the research subjects to interview about their involvement with animal cruelty, adding important information to any approach that would be taken to offer treatment to offenders or to design prevention programs.

There are a number of federally-funded and initiated research surveys that could be used to obtain vital information about animal cruelty and its link to family violence by making some minor changes to data collection and analysis procedures. Over the coming years, we hope to develop an approach to see that information on animal cruelty is addressed in all possible federal data gathering efforts.


As part of our goal to present information to policy makers and program developers, we will conduct research that evaluates DDAF-created materials and approaches for their effectiveness. DDAF will be teaming up with domestic violence agencies to apply for funding to evaluate the effectiveness of the AniCare Child approach to assessing the role of pets in families. DDAF hopes to document that asking questions about the treatment of pets in the family will lead to earlier identification of family violence, and also be useful in determining how much being a witness to violence has psychologically affected children exposed to family violence. If these studies can provide trustworthy information to the law enforcement and mental health communities,

it is much more likely that they will adopt an approach that considers animal cruelty as a vital factor in family violence.

DDAF is also working to promote the ways in which the human-animal relationship fosters empathy and other positive psychological traits. There is considerable evidence that children who demonstrate empathy are more likely to be successful students, have satisfying interpersonal relationships, and be successful in life. We also know that children who have a close bond with the family companion animal are more likely to score higher on measures of empathy. In recognition of the very important role of the human-animal

bond in children's development, DDAF created *The Empathy Connection*, a booklet that details the importance of empathy, the role of animals in its development, and that offers practical tips for parents, teachers, and other adults for encouraging empathy in children. The main lesson of *The Empathy Connection* is that empathy is a skill that can be taught and that every child deserves the chance to learn.

Like most of life's journeys, the journey toward "Creating Caring Communities" has no end. Ideals are always slightly beyond reach, but beckon us forward. However, there are many important destinations along the way that provide indications that we are going in the right direction—

toward a society that lives the truth that animal and human welfare are one and the same. 

Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D., is Director of Education for the Doris Day Animal Foundation. A practicing psychologist for 17 years and the author of three books, her latest is Animal Grace. Dr. Randour now devotes herself to educating lay and professional audiences on the link between animal abuse and human violence, and promoting legislative and policy changes that will benefit animals.



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