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**Exploring Pet Loss for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse: A Hitherto Uncharted  
Terrain of Trauma Impact and Recovery**

S. Caroline Taylor AM

Social Justice Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, 270 Joondalup Drive,

Joondalup, Western Australia, 6027. Email: [c.taylor@ecu.edu.au](mailto:c.taylor@ecu.edu.au)

Lauren J. Breen

School of Psychology and Speech Pathology, Curtin Health Innovation Research

Institute, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia, 6845. Email:

[lauren.breen@curtin.edu.au](mailto:lauren.breen@curtin.edu.au)

Corresponding author:

Professor S. Caroline Taylor AM, Social Justice Research Centre, Edith Cowan

University, 270 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, Western Australia, 6027. Email:

[c.taylor@ecu.edu.au](mailto:c.taylor@ecu.edu.au). Tel: +61 8 6304 5549.

### Abstract

There exists a paucity of research examining the psychosocial nexus between humans and animals and in particular, there is no published evidence on how the loss of a companion animal affects the healing identity and healing process of survivors of child sexual abuse. In this paper, we draw on data from several studies in which the threatened and real loss of pets experienced by child and adult survivors, and its effect in terms of non-disclosure of abuse, was raised across various forms of data collection. These studies exposed a hitherto uncharted terrain of trauma impact and recovery – pet loss for survivors of child sexual abuse – that is neither well-understood nor articulated in current literature. This paper highlights the need for a deeper and more sustained examination and understanding of this phenomenon in order to assist the recovery of survivors and enhance mental health professionals' understanding of the ongoing effects of pet loss and its relation to recovery.

**Keywords:** Child Sexual Abuse; Adult Survivors; Trauma; Recovery; Pets; Animals

#### Key Practitioner Messages:

- The effect of pet loss for survivors of child sexual abuse is underexplored;
- Perpetrators may threaten pets to silence their victims;
- The loss of a companion animal may affect the healing process of child sexual abuse survivors; and
- There is a need for more research to inform interventions to assist the recovery of survivors and education to enhance mental health professionals' understanding of the ongoing effects of pet loss and its relation to recovery.

## **Exploring Pet Loss for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse: A Hitherto Uncharted Terrain of Trauma Impact and Recovery**

There is limited peer-reviewed, published evidence on how the loss of a companion animal affects the healing identity and healing process of survivors of child abuse and neglect. This is despite the high global incidence of pet ownership (Batson, 2008) and the considerable international prevalence of child abuse and neglect (Brown *et al.* 1998; Dunne *et al.* 2003; May-Chahal & Cawson 2005; Pereda *et al.* 2009). Given that a large minority of people have experienced childhoods involving trauma, abuse, or neglect, the scope of this potential problem is large yet remains appreciably unexamined. In this paper, we review bodies of literature relating to the psychosocial bonds humans share with their animals. We then present and discuss data from several other studies conducted by the first author in order to explore the experiences and impacts of pet loss for survivors of child sexual abuse. Finally, we conclude with implications of this data for research and practice.

### *The Psychosocial Nexus between Humans and Animals*

Currently, very little is known about the psychosocial connection between humans and animals. The body of research literature on this topic is small and fragmented. One area that has received attention is the link between violence in the home and violence against pets. For example, interpersonal violence research shows that domestic violence victim survivors report that their violent partners would threaten to harm or give away the animals (Flynn, 2000). It is common for women and children entering shelters to describe the abuse of their companion animals (Ascione *et al.* 1997). In a recent study of 26 women living in situations of domestic violence (Tiplady *et al.* 2012), twenty (77%) reported that their pet had been physically abused and five (19%)

reported that the animals (dogs, chickens, and a cat) had died as a result of the abuse. Furthermore, eight women (32%) reported that their partner had threatened to harm or kill the pets if the woman left the relationship and 18 (69%) had no knowledge of domestic violence pet accommodation services. Taylor's (2001, 2004a; 2004b) research has revealed victims of intrafamilial child sexual abuse reporting the offender's threats to harm and actualised harm perpetrated on family pets. The link between child abuse, animal abuse and family violence is now well-established (Becker & French, 2004; Boat, 2002).

Another, more developed, thread within the literature concerns the link between survivors of traumatic childhoods and their pets. Many people, including those who have experienced traumatic childhoods, have strong bonds with their companion animals – indeed, animals are often considered to be ‘members of the family’ (Belk, 1996; Flynn, 2000; Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011; Walton & McConocha, 1996) – and these animals are an important component of their owners' healing processes. For example, one study indicated that companion animals provide unconditional love, security, a reason to live, and provided an emotional ‘escape’ for child abuse survivors (Johnson, 2001), and this is not surprising, given that animals are increasingly viewed as having therapeutic properties (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011). Another study (Nebbe, 1997) demonstrated that adult survivors of child abuse described their companion animal as supportive and as an instrumental component of their healing processes. Examples of this extraordinary bond have been written by survivors (see Fook *et al.* 2002, 2003, 2004). The healing aspect of the human-animal bond is increasingly recognised, with animals being used therapeutically for survivors of sexual

assaults with post-traumatic stress disorder (Dell *et al.* 2008; Lefkowitz *et al.* 2005) and incarcerated juvenile offenders (Harbolt & Ward, 2001).

#### *Pet Loss for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*

When these pets die or are otherwise ‘lost’, the loss triggers a grief response (Hunt *et al.* 2008; Planchon *et al.* 2002; Podrazik *et al.* 2000; Stephens & Hill, 1996). The grief response can be substantial and in many cases is comparable to the loss of a human loved one (Podrazik *et al.* 2000). The loss or death of these companion animals for survivors of child abuse is particularly noteworthy; research demonstrates that people who have experienced traumatic childhoods are at risk of developing complicated grief reactions following the death of a person (Vanderwerker *et al.* 2006). These complicated grief reactions are distinct from depression, anxiety and ‘normal’ grief responses and predict negative physical and psychological outcomes such as serious illness, suicidal ideation, and impairments in quality of life (Breen & O’Connor, 2007; Prigerson *et al.* 2008).

Thus, people who have experienced child abuse and then lose a pet have a significantly elevated risk of adverse grief reactions. Importantly, grief following pet loss is usually disenfranchised (Morales, 1997) and can often leave the grieving pet owner to experience a sense of isolation and exacerbated distress from the lack of social understanding about the significance of companion animal loss. For survivors of child sexual abuse, in particular adults, their childhood experiences continue to attract social stigma (e.g., Gibson & Leitenberg, 2001; Taylor 2004a, 2004b, forthcoming). Taylor (forthcoming) has articulated the sense of ‘social death’ experienced by survivors post-disclosure and the intensity, duration and even generational transfer of social death against the survivor. For many of these survivors, companion animals provide them

with a sense of unconditional love and acceptance they may never have experienced as children as well as being a positive conduit in assuaging the emotional pain, fear and terror they experienced both at the time of the abuse and post-abuse. Furthermore, people who have experienced childhood abuse are likely to experience additional and ongoing adversity. For instance, they may have been placed in care as a child, are at risk of further abuse, are more likely to have left the family home earlier than average, may have little or no contact with their families of origin, may have limited social support networks, may also have unstable or violent personal relationships, and are more likely to experience physical and mental health concerns in older adulthood (Draper *et al.* 2008; Frederick & Goddard, 2008; Swanston *et al.* 2002; Taylor *et al.* 2012). Moreover, there is the often ignored fact that many survivors are forced to leave their family because of the abuse and/or the disclosure and are consequently prevented from, or unable to take, their companion animals with them. All these factors combine and the end result is that people who have experienced traumatic childhoods and then lose a pet through death or relinquishment are unlikely to be supported adequately.

In her seminal work on the socio-legal construction of victims of childhood intrafamilial sexual abuse, Taylor (2001) encountered reports and accounts by children and adults contained in their police statements, about perpetrator threats to harm their pets if they disclosed and for adolescents – if they disclosed and left the family home. For some victims, the threats were so terrifying they never disclosed for years, even decades. These victims continued to suffer horrendous ongoing sexual abuse as young adults by the perpetrator because they could not foresee themselves being able to leave the family unit without their pets, which included horses, dogs and birds. One survivor who eventually fled the family home and was unable to take her horses because the

perpetrator refused to allow them to leave and because she had no support structures to assist her experienced the horror and distress of learning that the perpetrator had killed some of her animals and sold others (Taylor, 2001, forthcoming).

In another case the survivor, who experienced sexual abuse until the age of 21, when she left the family home, was also forced to leave without being able to take her horse and dog (Taylor, 2001). The perpetrator refused her access to the property, as in the above example. The survivor in this case was given support from friends post-disclosure and offered her free agistment (care and feeding for animals on another's land). With her parents refusing access to the property to retrieve her horse, the survivors, assisted by a friend, waited for a weekend when she knew her parents would be away and cut the padlock to the paddock containing her horse and rode him the 20km journey to the agistment site. It was at this time the survivor reported the sexual abuse to police.

Another case involved two young sisters who were each being sexually abused by their father – though at the time the sisters were unaware of the abuse of the other (Taylor, 2001). The offender had individually threatened that he would kill the family's pet dog by strangling him and then burning the house down with their mother inside, if they ever disclosed. The younger child became extremely fearful that disclosure would cause the death of her mother and dog and became terrified of leaving the house without them. The increased anxiety led the child to be fretful about leaving the dog at home when she went to school and developed an almost obsessive concern the with dog's welfare. It was this extreme stress and anxiety that led her to confide in her older sister. It was then that both became aware that both were being abused and that both had been threatened that the family dog and their mother would be killed. Within a few days the

two girls told their primary school teachers who notified police. The girls were put into foster care until authorities could be sure the mother was able to provide a protective and safe place for them to live. The children in this case lost access to their pet and it would appear from the court case that no-one recognised the children's distress that their disclosure and subsequent movement to another place of residence resulted in the family dog not being able to go with them.

In another distressing case an adult survivor of child sexual abuse reported how her father punished the then child by throwing the family's young puppy into an open fire, killing it (Taylor, 2001). The child witnessed this extreme form of cruelty and said that it exacerbated both her terror of her father and thus her fear of disclosure as well as causing her to feel guilt over the death of the puppy. In a recent survey of victims of sexual violence, including victims abused in childhood and also victims sexually assaulted in adulthood, 8% of those abused as children reported fearing for the safety of family pets due to threats made by the perpetrator (Taylor, unpublished data). Within the same survey, some respondents reported that their strong desire to protect family pets either from threatened harm, or an unknown future if the family dynamics altered, was a factor that inhibited disclosure in childhood. The following is a telling example:

‘...so, I couldn't, I had no real control over anything and I learned that to try meant a big price to pay....if I tried to avoid the abuse or stop he'd take it out on [names pets] and so I just knew that I had no choice or they would suffer...

Similarly, another survivor of child sexual abuse indicated that the threats made to her pets by her father contributed to the non-disclosure of the abuse (Taylor, unpublished data):

I remember one [time] when I was quite a bit younger I said [to father] I didn't want to him [sexually abusing] me and I wanted it to stop. The response was if you don't play by [father's rules] then number one no one was ever going to believe me...and that my animals would be killed...I mean, I used to go to school with threats that when I came home the horses wouldn't be there, [and] my dog would be dead, and I used to be terrified. I used to come home from school, and Fridays were worse because they were market days so I'd be really worried and upset at school all day, and the first thing I would do when I go home was do a head count to make sure [dogs and horses] were there.

Another survivor, when discussing why she feared disclosure of the childhood sexual abuse (Taylor, unpublished data) said her step-father made it very clear that, "he would kill my dog and he'd kill me and I really believed that. I really believed it..."

#### *Implications for Research and Practice*

Understanding the relationship and importance animals have in the lives during and after child sexual abuse is paramount for a range of reasons. Not only does it help us to understand the connection, comfort, and healing animals may provide for many survivors of child sexual abuse but it can provide a much needed framework for understanding the way in which companion animals are linked to the intrapersonal identity of the person (see Fook *et al.* 2002, 2003, 2004, for examples from survivors). This includes the role of companion animals in assisting survivors reconstitute a wounded identity post-abuse. That is, companion animals may be a vital link to increasing a sense of belonging, self-esteem, confidence and rebuilding a life, especially post-disclosure where a sense of family and community belonging may be disrupted or

lost entirely, leading to varying forms of social death as explored in depth by Taylor (forthcoming).

The adoption of unwanted, abandoned and ill-treated animals by survivors of child sexual abuse has been explained as a way for survivors to fulfil physical comfort needs without threats to their safety (e.g., Sanderson, 2006). However, despite a thorough search of several databases (e.g., PsycINFO, MEDLINE, Scopus) we could not locate peer-reviewed empirical research on this link. Taylor's (forthcoming) research has commented on the number of survivors who had pets who made a deliberate choice to adopt welfare animals and many who sought out animals in need of care and were devoted to the care of these animals, often at considerable expense. Could it be that survivors possess a heightened sense of compassion and suffering for animals that have also experienced cruelty or neglect or are simply unwanted? Is this phenomenon noted by Taylor a pattern among adults who have been traumatised in childhood? What aspects of this trend (if it is one) are healthy and healing and what aspects are maladaptive, that is, people who 'collect' numerous pets and become hermits and/or impoverished due to caring for their menagerie? Could this maladaptive behaviour result from trauma or abuse in their childhood? We believe these and other questions are worth posing and answering.

Understanding the relationship survivors may have with their companion animals also has implications for animal care so that, for example, veterinarians and veterinary nurses have a better understanding of the emotional connections survivors may have with their animals and thus why issues such as euthanasia, collecting and caring for unwanted pets, and distress at the suffering or illness of any pet, has such significance for a person who may have a background of child sexual abuse. Research

in the area of domestic violence demonstrates that pet owners are unlikely to disclose pet abuse to veterinarians as they fear repercussions from the abuser or judgment from the veterinarian, as well as experiencing feelings of shame (Tiplady *et al.* 2012).

### *Conclusion*

The loss of a companion animal affects the healing identity and healing process of survivors of child sexual abuse. Emerging data show that threats against children to harm their pets appear to be aligned with child sexual abuse. While pets can be harmed in other forms of abuse, including domestic violence and neglect, in child sexual abuse, the threats against pets are used to silence the child from disclosing the abuse. Sustained and focussed research is needed to understand the experience of survivors, the role of animals in their recovery and to draw out a nuanced framework of reference regarding the positioning and role of animals in the interplay of trauma and identify recovery. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse raise comments about the importance in their lives of companion animals either at the time of the abuse or now in their daily lives and the extent to which these animals are integral to their sense of identity and self-esteem and healing. However, this phenomenon is currently under-explored and under-developed, in both research and practice. There is a need for further research to elucidate the complexities of the experiences and their capacity to enhance or diminish pathways to healing.

Words: 2709

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