



Why are children and young people sometimes cruel to animals?

Children and animals, especially pets, can develop really close, strong bonds, and animals can be a really positive influence in many children's and young people's lives. Unfortunately, sometimes these relationships aren't so harmonious, and children and young people can display some concerning behaviours towards animals.

But what drives this behaviour? There can be a multitude of reasons why cruelty happens. From a simple lack of understanding of how to take care of or behave around animals to complex mental health concerns. Whatever the reason, it can be a difficult issue to deal with. Providing education and seeking further support are important actions when concerned about behaviour towards animals.

The RSPCA has commissioned several pieces of research (with Edinburgh University and Manchester Metropolitan University) looking into the reasons for animal cruelty by children and young people. We have also consulted with youth offending teams to understand their experiences supporting young people who may have harmed animals. Though the research is over 20 years old now, the reasons and motivations found still remain relevant today.

From this research, some of the motivations and causes of animal harm have included:

Edinburgh University

- Self harm
- Substance misuse
- Victims of crime
- Truancy
- Impulsive behaviour
- Low self-esteem

Manchester Metropolitan University

- Learned behaviour
- Jealousy
- Retaliation
- Fun
- Dislike the animal
- Jealousy

Youth Offending Teams

- Literacy issues
- Peer pressure/need to conform
- Lack of awareness of the harm caused
- Feelings of shame after the harm
- Unable to explain their behaviour
- Can't see connections between their behaviour and others



A 2001 Manchester Metropolitan University pilot study involved asking young people directly why they thought a child or young person might harm an animal.

Here are some of their responses:

Retaliation

Hurt animal because it hurt or annoyed them
Self-defence or training

Fun

Getting thrill
Enjoyment or pleasure
Responding to a dare
Showing off to look good
Peer pressure

Don't like it

Perhaps due to a lack of empathy
Do not like or understand the animal
Jealous of the animals, perhaps believing they are competing for the attention of a loved one
Scared

Carelessness

Ignorance or not knowing how to care for an animal properly
Immaturity - perhaps too young to know right from wrong or to know what may hurt an animal

Copying

Their actions could be learned behaviour from adults or peers - seeing someone treat animals or even people in a way that harms them and is inappropriate
Seen it on TV, film, in the media, or on the internet.

Boredom

Bored or wanted something to do

Substance misuse

Drugs or alcohol

Reciprocation

Hurting a person by hurting their animal
Controlling another person by threatening to hurt their animal

Curious

Wanted to know what would happen. For example, they might want to look inside to see what is there

Anger

Hurting the animal may be an outlet for anger or fear

Laziness

Can't be bothered to look after them properly
Can't be bothered to do something about cruelty or stop it from happening

Sadness or abuse

They feel sad or hurt inside, and harming others makes them feel better
Victim of abuse
Mental illness



Understanding animal behaviour

Poor understanding of animal behaviour can sometimes lead children and young people to harm animals, particularly in relation to showing affection.

For humans, hugging can be a wonderful way to show someone you care about them. It makes sense, therefore, that we want to show our care to our pets too, and hugging seems like a natural way for us to do that. However, for our pets, this can cause them to feel quite uncomfortable and even threatened. Hugging is not a natural behaviour for them, so what is affectionate to us can be the opposite for them. Although some animals may tolerate it, it isn't probably something they enjoy.

This can be quite difficult for children and young people to understand, and they may see this as rejection or continue to try and show affection this way. Teaching about animal behaviour and, in particular, body language is a really helpful way to improve relationships with children, young people, and animals.