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When do psychologists pay attention to children harming animals?

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Intentional cruelty to animals (CTA) by children and the implications thereof have been examined theoretically and empirically for many years, and there is now a well-developed literature base suggesting that this type of aberrant behavior warrants close (and immediate) attention, especially from clinicians, for a number of reasons. Research suggests there may be links between CTA and later aggression and/or violence towards humans as well as other problematic behaviors. Despite this the main diagnostic tool for most practising psychologists in Australia, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV-TR (American Psychological Association (APA), 2000), only includes CTA as a diagnostic feature in Conduct Disorder (CD). One implication of this limited inclusion may be that psychologists overlook disclosures of CTA in cases where CD is not indicated, thereby missing an important 'red flag' for other behavioral and emotional disturbances and/or abuse. The current study presents the findings from a survey completed by a sample of practicing psychologists in Queensland, Australia (n=69) that uses two vignettes (drawn from real case studies) to investigate the attention paid, and importance ascribed, to disclosures of intentional animal harm and the psychologists' intentions to treat CTA. While there was a high level of agreement across the sample regarding the key clinical indicators (and suggested diagnosis) for each vignette, most of the participants endorsed CTA as a key indicator only within the vignette that met the criteria for a CD diagnosis. Even when CTA was acknowledged as a significant indicator, few listed it as a primary area for intervention. The implications of this along with the differing patterns of endorsement across regional/rural and metropolitan-based psychologists are discussed.

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