

Animals Traditionally More Important Than Children

By [Caitlin Bootsma](#)

Did you know that the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals predates any organized effort to protect children from abuse? If that shocks you, good; it should. The history of child protection in our country is not an easy one to swallow, but there is good news. The undeniable fact is that we've come a long way in our national efforts to look after the welfare of children, even if we still have a long way to go. Also included in this article are tips on potential red flags of abuse.



Law professor John E.B. Myers proposes that we can divide the history of child protection into three eras in our country: pre-1875; 1875-1962; and 1962 through the present day. He [asserts](#) that we continue to move forward and that ultimately, this history is "a story of progress and hope."

Prior to 1875, there were little to no organized efforts to protect children. Societal understanding was that a child's well-being was under the jurisdiction of their parents and it wasn't for others to interfere. While there were some isolated cases of adults being prosecuted for the severe harm of minors, there were no laws on the books to specifically protect children, nor organizations to look out for their welfare. Knowing what we

know about prevalence of child abuse today, it is tragic to imagine the numbers of children who were severely maltreated without any assistance from others.

In the 1870s, the case of a little girl who lived in Hells Kitchen in Manhattan shined a light on the dark face of child abuse. Her name was Mary Ellen McCormack.

Using the precedent of animal cruelty laws, neighbors advocated for Mary Ellen's safety and brought the story of her abuse at the hands of her own adoptive mother to the authorities. Let's take a look at some of the symptoms of abuse that she exhibited based on neighbors' accounts and her own testimony. Mary Ellen was:

- Poorly dressed for the weather; barefoot and skimpily clothed for December in New York.
- Covered from head to toe with bruises in various shades of healing as well as with scars and burns; which showed consistent and severe physical beating.
- Extremely small and appeared to be malnourished; she did not know her age, but records indicated that she was 10, although she appeared to be younger than 7.

- Forced to sleep on the floor without proper bedding.
- Locked in a small, dark closet for hours at a time.
- Never seen outside of the apartment during the day.
- Rarely allowed to leave the apartment, except for at night in her yard; although neighbors could hear her screams and tears every day, she had never walked on the sidewalk or left the house otherwise.
- Unfamiliar with the idea of affection; she had never received any physical affection or attention, and had never been kissed or hugged by her adoptive mother, nor did she have any recollection of affection.

While the above symptoms don't seem to point to sexual abuse, they were definitely signs of neglect and physical abuse, and potentially emotional abuse. This is important for us to know, because often where there is one type of child abuse, there will likely be another type of abuse that is also occurring, and many symptoms across the different types of abuse are similar.

Mary Ellen's case was reported to the Animal Welfare Agency in 1874, since there weren't any laws protecting children at the time. The case was heard in court, and her abusive mother was charged with assault and battery and sentenced to jail for one year. Mary Ellen eventually went on to live in a stable home (you can read more about Mary Ellen's story in the New York Times article "[Case Shined First Light on Abuse of Children](#)").

Mary Ellen's case led to the foundation of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1874. By 1922, Myers tells us that 300 non-governmental organizations had been formed for the protection of children. This was tremendous progress, though many children in rural areas still had no recourse to any sort of advocacy or protection. At the same time, juvenile courts were springing up around the nation. By 1919, all states but three had a juvenile court system. While the main focus of these courts was delinquency, they did have the power to intervene in cases of abuse and neglect.

The Great Depression brought about both positive and negative results for child protection. On the positive end, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal did provide some provisions for dependent children. In particular, the Children's Bureau was given the authority to reach out to neglected children and provide some aid. While humble, this was the beginning of a tangible, national concern for children. At the same time, the Great Depression took away the financial underpinnings of the non-governmental child protection organizations.

As non-governmental organizations closed down, the government took an increased role in child protection, specifically through the police and the courts. The year of 1962 is considered a turning point in child protection for two reasons. The first is that a report called *The Battered Child Syndrome* was published, bringing increased attention to this tragedy. The second is that the Children's Bureau met to see how they could further address child abuse, which resulted in a call for child abuse reporting laws. In a few short years, by 1967, all states had enacted a reporting law.

Since this time, increased attention has been brought to child abuse and further laws have been enacted to protect children. The awful news is that children are still abused and sometimes the system fails to properly address this abuse—or people don't report their concerns. The good news is, as a nation, we continue to try to address this crisis and much is done, every single day, to help children who are victims of abuse. In the time since the first reporting laws hit the books, much progress has been made. Myers [says](#), "Today, child protective services are available across America, billions of dollars are devoted to child welfare, and thousands of professionals do their best to help struggling parents and vulnerable children."

As caring adults, we recognize that one case of abuse is too many—regardless of what type of abuse is occurring. That is why there is such a need for us not only to look out for children under our care, but also to continue to support child protection efforts locally and nationally. The reality now is that while our country's child protection agencies aren't perfect, we do have child protection measures in place. So, if you see or hear something similar to these examples below, you must do the right thing to help:

- You might be the neighbor who hears a child's screams or cries of distress.
- You might see a child's burns, cuts, lacerations or bruises that don't have plausible explanations.
- In the course of your volunteer or work activities, you might notice that a child appears malnourished, dresses inappropriately for the climate, or always seems to wear long sleeves and pants.
- The child might come to you with a testimony of abuse, and they may even approach it as if it's happening to a "friend" to see how you'll respond.
- The youth might shrink away from physical touch, socially withdraw from others or develop fear, eating disorders, anxiety or depression.
- The child might exhibit sudden behavioral changes or school performance changes, and may also have poor school attendance.
- The child might appear to be frightened of family members and may not want to go home.
- The child might bathe excessively or have poor hygiene.

In each of these scenarios, you must do the right thing and err on the side of caution for the safety of the child. The situation may not actually be abusive, but your responsibility is to communicate the information to the right party, which would be child protective services (who is responsible for investigating suspicions of child abuse, and who have strict thresholds upon what the correspondence needs to meet in order for an investigation to begin). Please advocate for children who cannot truly advocate for themselves, and communicate immediately with the child protective services in your state if you suspect or know of any type of child abuse.

