



SOLVING ANIMAL BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

*Animal Behavior And Animal Rights*¹ by Peter L. Borchelt, Ph.D.²

Unfortunately, animal shelters throughout the United States are full of perfectly healthy dogs and cats who find themselves there not because they are unfit companions for the humans with whom they once lived, but because of behavioral problems the latter either did not recognize or could not deal with, or both. These problems include inability to become housebroken, rough play, destructiveness, serious aggression, and much more. It has been estimated that over 40% of pet owners report noticeable behavioral problems in their animals-which translates, nationwide, into something like 40 million pets with behavioral problems.

It is commonly, but erroneously, believed that animal behavior problems most often are due to irresponsible or "crazy" owners. If that were true, however, the chances of successfully treating behavioral problems would be quite low. In my experience, most pet behavioral problems occur in otherwise friendly, affectionate, well-behaved pets owned by the average person, people no more irresponsible or crazy than you or me-and in my experience and that of my colleagues, the chances of successfully solving the many kinds of problems are actually quite high.

For the last 20-25 years, animal behaviorists, who are trained in animal psychology, have been developing more and more ways to help pet owners prevent and solve behavioral problems. Some of the background information that led to treatment techniques came from research, from the clinical application of animal learning techniques to human problems (e.g., treatment of fears and phobias), and from basic drug research in both human and veterinary medicine. Even though there are many unknowns and much yet to be discovered, trained animal behaviorists now have enough information to greatly improve the lives of our pets and those who care for them.

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At least two things are truly exciting about the field of applied animal behavior. One is the possibility of a partnership between pet animals, pet owners, and behavioral scientists and other professionals. Together, they can simultaneously help animals, help people, and help increase our understanding of animal behavior and the interactions between animals and people. This can be done using research methods and techniques that harm no one and are humane for the animals, that are helpful and interesting for the pet owner, and that advance our knowledge of animal behavior.

Equally, if not more, exciting is that by dealing with animal behavior problems as the preventable and solvable situations they usually are, beloved animals can remain with their owners and enrich their lives, rather than being dumped in shelters where they are destined to perish only because they barked too much or wouldn't use a litter box.³

General Information

Introduction

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) estimates that as many as half of all dogs relinquished to shelters are surrendered due to behavioral problems. Dr. Nicholas Dodman, Director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, estimates that 70% of these animals are euthanized, *making behavioral problems the leading cause of death for companion animals in the United States.*

A pet's behavior can either strengthen or deteriorate the relationship between a pet and guardian, with behavioral problems seriously jeopardizing this important bond. Understanding how to prevent many behavioral problems and how to deal with problems that do arise can save many pets' lives and can spare both pets and guardians a great deal of heartbreak.

Prevention

The most effective means of dealing with behavioral problems is to prevent their occurrence. Prevention begins *before* a pet is acquired. A prospective guardian must consider every aspect of pet care and honestly evaluate their willingness and ability to care for an animal *for its entire life* before making this commitment. Many behavioral problems result from guardians' failure to meet their pets' physical or emotional needs.

Spaying and Neutering

Having your pet spayed or neutered is one of the most important actions you can take to prevent behavioral problems later in life. Some of the many behavioral benefits derived from altering your pet include: decreased tendency to soil the house; reduction in persistent barking or plaintive meowing; less desire to roam; less anxious or

³ ISAR is pleased to publish this introductory essay by Dr. Borchelt which stresses that there is a recognized scientific field of applied animal behaviorism, and a small but effective group of professional practitioners who can often prevent and solve animal behavior problems-and in so doing, save the lives of many animals who would otherwise eventually be put to death through no fault of their own.

unpredictable behavior; reduced aggression; and improved disposition which can lead to better relationships between pets and their guardians and also between multiple pets in a household.

Exercise Requirements

All dogs need supervised exercise. However, the amount of exercise required varies greatly from one breed (or cross) to another and from one individual dog to another. Inadequate exercise can cause behavioral problems. Keep in mind that older dogs usually require less exercise than puppies and are often an excellent choice for someone who may not have the energy to exercise a young dog.

Some breeds (and crosses) are inclined to behave in certain ways due to generations of breeding for a specific purpose. For example, border collies have an inherent desire to herd and terriers often love to dig. Failing to deal with these (and other) innate characteristics in a creative way may result in frustration for the dog which can lead to behavioral problems.

Time and Attention

All domestic animals need companionship. Dogs are especially sensitive to the need for attention, as they are pack animals by nature and they crave close ties with their families. Behavioral problems can result from neglecting this important need.

Early Socialization is Very Important, Especially for Dogs

Dogs must be socialized from an early age. They should be exposed to different situations and familiarized with a variety of people (including children) and also with other animals. Puppy socialization classes are held in many communities and can get pups off to a great start. Veterinarians' offices often have information on such classes.

Training

Training will greatly improve a pet/guardian relationship, with the extent of training depending on the situation. Dogs should be housetrained and cats should learn to use a litter box. Every dog should know basic obedience, including: sit, stay, heel, come, down, and "no." Cats may need to learn not to sharpen their claws on furniture (declawing is inhumane and is *not* a solution for responsible guardians). It's very important that pets be trained properly and humanely to avoid behavioral problems later in life. There are many excellent books and trainers available for guidance. Carefully research training methods to be sure they are humane.

Older animals are often overlooked in favor of young puppies and kittens when choosing a prospective pet. However, adult cats and dogs are an excellent adoption choice, as they have often received basic training and dogs are usually through the "chewing" stage. Contrary to popular belief, old dogs (and cats) most certainly can learn new tricks.

Behavioral Problems Can Emerge Due to a Variety of Reasons

Sometimes, despite the best intentions and an honest effort, behavioral problems still arise. There are some important considerations when dealing with these problems.

Behavioral Problems Can Be a Warning Sign for Illnesses

At the onset of behavioral problems, a pet should have a thorough veterinary examination to eliminate the possibility of a medical cause for the behavior. For example, if a cat suddenly stops using the litter box, a urinary tract infection may likely be the cause.

Evaluate the Pet's Lifestyle

After ruling out a medical cause for the problem, the pet's lifestyle should be examined with an open and understanding mind. Honestly evaluate if the animal's physical and emotional needs are being met.

Try to Understand the Pet's Behavior

Many "problems" are actually normal behavior for an animal, but are inappropriate in a home setting. For example, furniture may be used to satisfy a cat's instinct to scratch or a dog's natural desire to chew. Both cats and dogs, particularly unneutered males, instinctively mark their "territory" with urine. When training their pets, it's important for guardians to understand that these are natural behaviors for animals and must be dealt with as such. An understanding attitude will improve the success of modifying an animal's natural instincts to acceptable home behavior.

Have Realistic Expectations of the Pet

Some people may expect their cat or dog to act like a friend's or neighbor's pet without realizing the time and training that went into the animal they're comparing their own to. Similarly, someone who has recently lost an older, trained animal may have forgotten the effort that went into training the pet they lost and may unfairly compare a new pet with the trained animal. It's also important to remember that animals are individuals and some will be easier to train than others.

Behavioral Problems Need Not Be Death Sentences

Guardians respond to behavioral problems in a variety of ways. Some people may try to resolve the problem or accept the behavior, but often, behavioral problems end in abuse and/or relinquishment of the animal. It's important to recognize that behavioral problems can be solved. Relinquishing the animal to a shelter solves the guardian's problem, but creates a bigger problem for the animal. Quite often, guardians who surrender their animals for behavioral problems soon obtain another pet and often repeat the cycle.

Medical causes for problems should be treated by a veterinarian. Other problems may be resolved with lifestyle changes, such as increasing time and attention or exercise (be sure to increase exercise gradually and consult a veterinarian before starting an exercise program for older pets or any animal with a health condition). Professional advice is necessary for serious problems. Be sure to choose a trainer or behavioral specialist carefully, as poor training can do more harm than good. Harsh training methods can

aggravate existing problems or create new problems, especially when dealing with aggression.

A guardian must be willing to commit to a relationship with their pet. Like any relationship, there will be good times and bad times. A responsible guardian is resolved to work through the bad times. It's important to remember that no one (human or animal) is perfect and everyone makes mistakes. How these mistakes are handled can mean the difference between life and death.