

Managing Pets with Behavior Problems: Realistic Expectations

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OVERVIEW

Behavior problems are a source of distress for owners and often for veterinarians when they are first presented with the problem in the examination room. Time constraints, personal interest, or lack of knowledge may preclude a full examination and consultation. Despite these limitations, veterinarians should make every effort to provide guidance about how the owners might prevent the problem from continuing or proceed to improve the problem.

A separate appointment time is the best way to offer management recommendations. This approach allows evaluation of the problem so that the most appropriate recommendations can be made.

WHAT DO MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS OFFER?

In most cases behavior problems, by the time they are mentioned to the veterinarian, are not isolated events. In fact, they are likely to occur fairly frequently, often causing distress to the owner and pet alike. Behavior problems often are cited as a reason for pet relinquishment [1–5], and it is likely that if the pet is not euthanized it will re-homed and perhaps exhibit the same behavior in the new home [6]. Management solutions can help break the cycle of frustration and, in the case of aggression, perhaps prevent further injuries to people and other animals.

Management solutions also prevent further learning from making the problem worse. Each time the pet engages in the unwanted behavior, that behavior is further reinforced and shaped. Often careful questioning finds that the pet is selecting the behavior increasingly earlier in the behavioral sequence, and the undesirable behavior itself can escalate over time. Behaviors that are repeated may bias neurologic pathways to select that response at the next encounter with the stimulus [7]. The escalation of the problem behavior often coincides with increased owner attempts to stop and/or change the behavior. These interventions can be punitive, dangerous, and damaging to the human–animal bond and may further increase anxiety and conflict. By managing the situation

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and decreasing the occurrences of the problem behaviors, a certain sense of order can be restored. (For additional details on conflict and aggression, see the article by Luescher and Reisner in this issue.)

Management solutions also allow the owner to acknowledge and respect the individual pet's limitations. In many cases the pet does not have a problem with its behavior because it has a goal in performing the behavior, whether or not that goal is understandable or acceptable to the owner. The dog that barks and lunges at people or other dogs usually wants them to stay away, and of course they do. Because the behavior is successful, the likelihood that the behavior will be repeated in similar circumstances is increased. If a situation is likely to evoke a certain response, especially one that triggers fear or anxiety, either ending or avoiding that situation should diminish the underlying emotion.

Finally, management interventions may help decrease emotional arousal. When a pet is highly emotionally aroused and displaying aggression, anxiety, fear, or some other emotion, it is unable to learn something new. In fact, teaching the pet new and appropriate tasks is impractical at the time the problem behavior is being exhibited. If the problem behavior is going to change, however, new tasks must be taught so that the pet learns to perform an alternative behavior that is acceptable to the owner when presented with the stimulus in the future. Therefore, having strategies to avoid and/or remove the pet from the situation can help keep emotional arousal low, might provide an opportunity to train behaviors that are desirable, and perhaps might diminish future episodes, increasing safety and reducing anxiety for the owner and pet.

GETTING STARTED

At each veterinary visit owners should be questioned about whether the pet has exhibited any changes in behavior or any behavioral issues that they might want to address. Pet owners otherwise may not be aware that the veterinarian is available and willing to provide guidance or may wait until the problem is well established and potentially more difficult to manage or treat (see the article by Shaw and colleagues elsewhere in this issue). Once a client has mentioned a behavioral issue, the first step is to acknowledge quickly that a problem exists and to recognize that intervention is appropriate. A complete physical examination and other laboratory testing or imaging studies as indicated by findings are essential, because illness often can contribute to behavioral problems. Time is necessary to provide the appropriate recommendations and interventions; therefore separate appointments should be scheduled. The veterinarian should make clear to the client the goal for the appointment. If full behavioral consultations are offered, set aside enough time to do so. The articles by Seibert and Landsberg and Shaw and colleagues found elsewhere in this issue detail how that might be accomplished. If a full consultation is beyond the veterinarian's expertise, one should offer an appointment that will focus on help managing the problem behavior and allow at least an hour. Before beginning, explain charges to the client and how follow-up will be obtained. Plan to make a chart

or history form so that the consultation and resultant recommendations are recorded.

Handouts, training aids, books, and videos are all useful adjuncts to creating a management plan. Having these tools ready in the consultation location will allow efficient use of the clinician's time. Head collars, body harnesses, muzzles, pheromones, and even certain toys can be stocked and ready to be dispensed. Handouts and books are available from many sources, and a well-stocked library is useful. Providing useful Web links also can help support or even expand the veterinarian's recommendations after the visit.

In some cases the situation has entered a crisis mode, and clients cannot wait for an appointment. One of the more useful interventions for many behaviors is to offer to get the animal out of the home, either with day boarding or 24-hour care. If the problem is aggression, and injuries have occurred, removing the animal from the home may allow decisions to be made and provide safety for people who would have come in contact with the dog. If the problem is separation anxiety with destruction to property and/or injury to the animal, day boarding allows all parties to become calm and perhaps reach some sort of equilibrium. If the clinic is unable to offer these options, one should become familiar with trustworthy kennels in the area to which clients can be referred for these interventions.

DIAGNOSIS

At the appointment it is essential to identify the problem behavior(s) that need to be addressed. As straightforward as this process may seem, in many cases the client's description of the problem may be filled with emotional statements and have very little description of actual behaviors. For example, a client may come with the complaint of an overreaction to noises such as the telephone ringing or the doorbell. When asked what the animal does, the owner replies that when the telephone rings and the owner gets up to answer it, the dog chases and nips at them. If, however, they answer the telephone sitting down or are next to the telephone when it rings, the problem does not occur. In this case the problem is not the ringing of the telephone but rather the movement that answering the telephone or moving toward the door elicits. Therefore, an accurate description helps determine what types of intervention might be useful. In this example, keeping the telephone nearby (eg, by carrying a portable phone) might be one management tool.

In addition it is necessary to attempt to establish the frequency of the problem behavior so that progress can be assessed. Improvement is more difficult to track in problems that occur with low frequency, because a lack of problematic behavior may not mean the target behavior has changed, but rather that it has not yet occurred. If possible, knowing when and where the behavior takes place can point to management techniques that might be effective interventions.

The next step is to attempt to identify inciting stimuli whenever possible. Owner descriptions may link together various things that may not be related. Destruction in the absence of the owner is a good example. The

owners may relate that when they leave the home the dog gets into the garbage and/or the pantry and creates a mess. This behavior could appear to be separation anxiety, but careful questioning might reveal that the dog does the same thing when they are home if they do not watch the pet. In this case the problem might be food-seeking behavior, and making a video or audiotape might be needed to determine what is happening and if any signs of anxiety are noted. If none are seen, then putting food and garbage in inaccessible locations may manage the behavior.

Owner descriptions often are peppered with emotional phrases such as “he looks upset,” “he is afraid,” “he looks angry,” or “he is mad at me.” These statements are not helpful unless they can be coupled with descriptions of actions and body postures. Descriptions of actions and postures allow the clinician to attempt to assess the underlying emotional state of the pet, which may or may not correspond to the owners’ statements. This assessment becomes essential, especially in behavioral problems with underlying anxiety, because treatment must focus on changing the emotional state as well as the pet’s outward behavior. The goal of the interview is to learn what the animal did, what it looked like both at the present time and at the time the behavior first began, and not what the owner thought the pet “meant” by its behavior.

Understanding the personality/temperament of the pet also is important when working on management solutions and managing expectations. Highly excitable and reactive pets may find certain stimuli always difficult to cope with. Some animals may do better by always being confined when large numbers of people come to the home or by not going to the dog park. Helping owners understand the individual pet’s limitations can help set realistic expectations for success.

PROGNOSIS

For rehabilitation of the pet to be successful, most behavior problems require a time commitment from the family and willingness to alter the daily routine. In some cases the family composition, the time available, and frustration with the ongoing problem may impede resolution. In certain cases the owners may be more willing to work for change if management solutions can diminish the problem behavior. Behaviors that have been present for some time may be more difficult to eliminate, so prognosis might be improved by focusing on improvement rather than resolution.

ASSESSING PROGNOSIS FOR AGGRESSIVE DOGS

The commonly used factors in assessing risk and prognosis for aggression in dogs include the willingness of the owners to live with risk, the family composition, the ability to provide safety, the size of the pet, the predictability of the behavior, the context, the choices the pet made, and, in cases of aggression, the severity of the aggression and the injuries sustained.

Depending on the circumstances, their temperament, genetic factors, and experiences, all pets can bite. When an animal chooses to use aggression in

a certain situation, then, at least in that situation, aggressive biting is a behavioral strategy that individual pet is willing to use. If successful, aggression is likely to be repeated, should that situation recur in the future. For this reason an animal that has bitten in the past usually presents a higher risk for future biting than one that never has bitten anyone. Owners need to realize that the risk of future biting is real, and some owners may not be willing to live with that risk. Biting animals are rarely cured; rather, they are controlled and with proper safety precautions may be able to be retained in the home.

Certain family compositions may make keeping an aggressive pet unsafe. Families with very small children, elderly persons, and persons who have physical or mental disabilities or a very unpredictable household schedule may not be suitable for rehabilitating an aggressive pet. Because the possibility of future biting events is real, some households may not be able to provide safety for people who live there or come to visit the home.

The size of the pet also is a factor in assessing prognosis in aggression cases because larger dogs tend to do more damage when and if they bite. In a study looking at risk factors for euthanasia in dogs that were aggressive toward family members, a dog weighing more than 18 kg was more likely to be euthanized than a smaller dog, especially if the aggression was shown in what were considered “benign dominance challenges such as petting and bending over the dog” [8]. Later research looking at the risk factors for dog bites to owners in a household setting, however, found that small dogs were more likely than larger dogs to have bitten family members [9]. Some homes may tolerate aggressive behaviors from smaller dogs because of a perception that they may not be as dangerous.

Another factor that must be considered when determining risk and prognosis is the predictability of when and how aggressive the pet might be in response to certain triggers. Reisner and colleagues [8] found that dogs whose aggressive behaviors were unpredictable more likely to be euthanized than dogs who were predictable. In other words, if the dog growls only when one tries to move it, the situation might be sufficiently predictable and preventable that it might be possible to keep the dog in the home. On the other hand, a dog that sometimes growls and at other times lunges and bites when presented with the same trigger stimulus might have to be relinquished. Predictability may make it easier for some owners to avoid the aggressive encounters and to diminish biting behavior and subsequent injury.

The context in which the aggression occurs is another factor to consider. In some contexts aggression is understandable, although unwanted. These contexts include handling food, painful manipulations, extremely frightening situations, and redirected aggression. In some cases it may be possible to manage these situations, diminish pain, or avoid the situation and/or medicate the animal.

It also helps to look at the choices that the dog has made during these episodes and at the severity of the aggressive behavior that occurred. Many dogs have good control of their aggressive signaling and can choose various

levels with which to respond. Aggressive responses can vary from threats (growling, snarling with or without a growl), snapping (bites that do not make contact), bites without puncture or laceration, and injurious, damaging bites. Historical information gathered during a behavioral consultation should attempt to determine if the dog had other choices during the encounter (such as escape, lower-level aggressive response), whether the dog signaled to show intent before aggression, whether the response was out of proportion to the supposed stimulus, and if the aggressive behavior has changed over time. Finally, the severity of the injuries inflicted should be evaluated. In some situations the dog may give only a single bite; other dogs may bite multiple times within a single episode. In some situations the biting might be directed toward the stimulus (a hand reaching for the dog); in other cases the pet may attack other body parts (jumping up at the torso or face). More extreme responses and severe injuries requiring medical attention may be associated with greater risk and poorer prognosis. Pets that show very explosive aggressive responses, especially in response to low-level stimuli, may be particularly dangerous to keep in the home.

AGGRESSION AND SAFETY

Because aggressive behavior is a common owner complaint, and the risk of human or animal injury might be high, instructions for providing safety for those who must be around the pet are essential and should be the first issue addressed. Owners should be informed that all animals may bite at some time, and that those that are known to have used biting as a strategy in the past may be more likely to do so in the future. Often the only way to prevent all future aggressive episodes and injury is euthanasia especially if re-homing is impractical or unsafe.

Education on how pets display aggressive signaling using facial expressions and body postures should be explained and described to owners. A better understanding of what aggressive signaling looks like and what the animal is trying to convey often helps owners avoid injuries. Owners should be advised to discontinue all interactions with animals showing aggressive posturing and not to resume interactions until the animal is calm. Isolation of the pet in a secure location for quite some time may be necessary. Pictures of body postures used by dogs and cats are useful in helping owners understand what they are seeing. These pictures are available from various sources [10,11] and in the article by Levine elsewhere in this issue.

All known trigger situations for aggression must be avoided. A good history should elucidate what these situations and triggers are. If needed, a list should be compiled to clarify for the owner which situations are potentially dangerous. Environmental management, such as separation of individuals from the pet, confinement, and the use of muzzles, leashes and head collars, all factor into providing safety for people around an aggressive pet. In many cases providing safety may mean confining the pet away from either the triggers and/or the victims. The pet should be confined by an adult to a location such as a crate,

a room with a lock, or a locked yard from which the dog cannot escape. Confinement must occur each and every time the trigger for the aggression might be encountered; however, many families are unable to take this measure. In addition, all physical reprimands must be stopped, because they are likely to increase the dog's emotional arousal and perhaps its aggressive responses. Specific recommendations for certain situations are described later.

SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Understandably, owners are quite concerned about whether the unwanted behaviors can be curtailed and resolved. Setting realistic expectations for improvement and discussing the difference between improvement and resolution is important. Most behavior problems presented for help may be chronic in nature and in this way may mimic many other chronic disorders seen in veterinary medicine. Often the animals are responding to the social and physical environment in which they live, following their innate tendencies for responses and acclimation. Learning and adaptation also often are responsible for the ongoing performance of the target behavior. Owners should be counseled that behavior problems will take time to control and/or resolve; even after treatment certain problem situations or actions may remain but, it is hoped, will be manifest at a lower level or be easier to control. Asking owners to keep journals and/or daily diaries to assess the frequency of the targeted problem behaviors can help determine if improvement has occurred.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

Certain management options may apply to all cases; others are appropriate only in certain situations. In all cases, increasing the owner's understanding of the pet's behavior and of how learning influences later behavior will help the owner view the situation in a more positive way. Some management options require pretraining to increase compliance, as described later. Teaching new responses is the ultimate goal of behavior therapy and usually is facilitated by the use of rewards. It should be determined which rewards are the most desirable for the pet. For most pets, the most desired reward is a food item, but some might prefer play or petting. These rewards should be arranged in a hierarchy, with the most desirable reward reserved for each new task in training that gradually approximates the final goal. No rewards of any kind should be given randomly; rewards must be earned by completion of a requested task.

As part of management, the owner should be educated on ways to provide appropriate and species-specific environmental enrichment and daily exercise. For dogs these might be walks off the property if the pet is under control and play time such as fetch using two objects. For cats, opportunities to forage for food, increased play and hiding, climbing, and jumping opportunities should be provided. All these enrichments can help relieve underlying anxiety and stress that contribute to behavior problems. During interactive times, these activities also can be part of training opportunities and teach the pet appropriate interactions with family members.

Certain management options can be detrimental to the pet or impede resolution; these must be identified and stopped. Repeated encounters with provocative stimuli in an attempt to “socialize” the pet actually may make the pet more sensitive to the stimulus and worsen rather than improve the situation. Therefore, these encounters must be curtailed. Examples include ongoing visits to the dog park with a dog that shows anxious or aggressive responses, allowing people to greet anxious and/or aggressive dogs, or keeping aggressive dogs in a home together despite fighting.

Punishment, especially for aggressive signaling, can be dangerous. The punishment is directed toward the outward signal that the pet is performing, in many cases the aggressive signal. Although the aggressive signal may cease, the underlying emotional state may remain. The result often is what seems to be unpredictable biting behavior, because the pet’s emotional state may be the same or worse, even though it has learned not to growl. In reality, it probably is desirable for aggressive dogs to signal so that people and other animals nearby are aware of the danger that this animal presents and, it is hoped, remain far enough away to avoid injury. (See the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior punishment guidelines at www.avsabonline.org.)

Recently, treatment modalities seem to have refocused on procedures that have been designed to gain control of the dog through a dominance paradigm and/or exercises. In most cases these methods do not take into consideration any other underlying emotion, such as fear or anxiety, which are the most common reasons for unwanted behaviors. Instead these techniques often rely on punishment, leash corrections, and yelling, which can increase fear and anxiety and even cause aggression directed toward the person administering the technique. For these reasons such interventions are not recommended and in many cases may be harmful.

Finally, vocal or postural interactions in an attempt to soothe the pet also may be counterproductive. Because soft vocal intonations and petting may resemble praise, it is possible for the pet to assume that it is being rewarded for the behavior it is engaging in at the time. Rather than scolding, coddling, or patting the pet, the owner should try to give the pet a direction with a command such as “sit” or “watch,” which, if successful can be reinforced.

Increasing Owner Control

Increasing the owner’s control over the pet in daily interactions will help the pet learn to follow owner commands and often empowers owners as they learn to control the pet in benign ways. This technique has been called many things over the years (eg, “nothing in life is free” [12], “learn to earn” [13], “structuring your relationship with your pet” [14], “protocol for deference” [15]), but they all have in common asking a pet to perform an obedience task such as “sit” before the pet receives anything that it wants. In general this approach accomplishes three things. If the pet has been asked to sit (and complies) multiple times in a day, it may learn to comply with the sit command at other times and in other situations. Having the dog in a sitting position increases control. For

some pets, learning to obey the command also allows them to learn to take contextual cues from the owner (ie, what should I do now?). Finally, it allows controlled and predictable interactions that may help decrease uncertainty and anxiety. In turn, the dog also gains control and predictability by learning what behaviors earn rewards. Both dogs and cats can be asked to follow this protocol. If the animal does not know the command for “sit,” that command can be taught, or another command, such as “wait,” can be substituted.

Changing Underlying Emotional State: Teaching Relaxation on Command

Because the goal in the treatment of most problem behaviors is to change the pet’s underlying emotional state and response when presented with the stimulus from anxiety and fear to calmness and relaxation, teaching relaxation on command is useful. This technique is not an exercise in “sit” and “stay” but rather is an attempt to get physiologic and postural relaxation under voice command. If that control can be accomplished, the pet can be cued to relax when faced with stimuli that cause emotional arousal. Unless the pet knows how to perform the task without distractions and when calm, it is unlikely that the owner could get the pet to relax when emotionally aroused. To be effective, the owners should be given step-by-step instructions in how to teach and assess relaxation in the pet. Various protocols have been detailed in other sources and called various things [14,15]; all have the goal of teaching the pet how to be calm.

It also can be useful for the owner to use a bed, mat, or rug as the training site. This approach allows the behavior not to be associated only with a specific location; because the object is movable, it can be taken to various rooms and the exercise repeated there as well. The pet should be brought calmly to the training location and asked to “sit” or “down” (depending on what the pet knows and the amount of control needed). A leash, head collar, or body harness may be appropriate in some cases. The pet then is cued to stay and relax. The owner should use the same key words each time. The owner should watch the pet for signs of emotional change toward relaxation. These signs might include relaxing of the eyes or ears, no wagging or twitching tail, putting the head down, and slower respirations, but initially the owner should watch for one change and, when that change is observed, reward the pet with food and praise. The pet then is cued to get up, move, and come back to the settle position again. Training sessions should be quite short, only 5 to 10 minutes. Each session can add progressive signs of relaxation. For some pets massage also can be added as an aid to relaxation. A favored toy or chew or feeding toy might also be used to reinforce use of the area, provided the problem is not one of possessive aggression. For some pets using a crate may be more appropriate for relaxation training.

Avoiding Problem Situations: Teaching Confinement

One of the more useful management options for both dogs and cats is confinement to prevent encounters with the stimulus. It is unrealistic, however, to

expect a pet to accept confinement without some type of pretraining. Therefore, a program that teaches the pet how to be confined in a crate, in a room with a closed door, or behind a baby gate will help owners be compliant with this recommendation.

Confinement training should start with the pet and the owner in the same room. If a crate is to be used, and the animal already is comfortable using the crate, the pet should be placed in the crate with a delectable food reward and the door latched. The owner should sit nearby occupied with a quiet task and ignore the pet. After a few minutes, and if the pet is calm and quiet, the pet is released. If a crate is not an option, the same protocol can be practiced with a closed door or a baby gate in the doorway. Gradually the amount of time the pet spends in the location is increased, alternating shorter and longer periods. Time should be increased only if the pet is able to remain calm. Once the pet can be calm with the owner present, short sessions with the owner out of the room can be attempted. The time again must return to very short sessions so that the pet is successful and not anxious. Once the pet learns how to be left alone in confinement when there are no distractions, it is more likely to remain there when placed into confinement at other times. Food rewards or whatever is most desirable to the pet always should be used so the animal continues to associate confinement with a pleasant circumstance. A favored toy, chew bone, or food can be used to reinforce the use of the area as well as to help keep the pet in the location. Finally, the pet can be taught to go to the location with a verbal cue, a hand signal, and a food reward.

Avoiding Triggers for Unwanted Behaviors

Avoiding triggers is another useful management tool. Once the trigger stimuli and how they are encountered have been identified correctly, it may be possible to offer strategies for avoidance. Although it might be practical to improve some of these forms of aggression over time, using reward-based training and proper management devices, the initial focus (and sometimes the permanent focus) should be aimed at avoidance. In other situations, avoidance will prevent reinforcement of the behavior through repetition while new behaviors are substituted.

Food-related aggressive episodes

Most food-related aggressive episodes involve dogs, although at times a cat may guard an object. If the dog stands stiffly, growls, snarls (lifts its lip and shows its teeth), lunges, snaps, or bites when approached while eating or when in possession of a toy, chew bone, or stolen item, this situation must be avoided. If the dog is aggressive around human food, it should not be in the room while food is being prepared and consumed. Children must not walk around the home eating food if the dog is in the house. If the dog is aggressive around its food, then the food is prepared while the dog is outside, is placed in a room with a door that can be locked, and the dog is put into this room. The door is closed and locked, if necessary with a latch up high that cannot be reached by children. The dog is not allowed out until the food is

consumed. Once the food is consumed, the dog is allowed out but is put outside or in another room, and then the food bowl can be picked up and put away.

If a dog steals some type of human food, the dog should be allowed to consume the food, and no one should attempt to take it away. To prevent further food-stealing episodes, food must be stored out of the dog's reach, or the dog must be kept out of food-related areas. In some homes having a garbage container under the sink for food garbage only and another for paper and nonfood trash helps prevent food stealing from taking place. If the dog or cat is aggressive over certain items, access to these items must be avoided or allowed only when the animal is securely confined. All food items that are given to the pet must be ones that can be consumed quickly, or the pet must be confined while eating them.

Aggressive responses to family members

If the pet gets stiff, growls, snarls (lifts its lip and shows its teeth), lunges, snaps, or bites during any form of social or physical interaction, these interactions must be identified and avoided by family members and visitors. Possible stimuli include petting, hugging, picking up the dog, grooming, pushing, stepping over it, grabbing it by the collar, wiping its feet, and cleaning its ears, among others. Feet can be cleaned by allowing the dog to remain in a room covered with towels until dry. If the dog must be moved frequently from one place to another, it can drag a leash to facilitate moving the pet without physical contact.

If the pet growls, snarls, lunges, snaps, or bites at children in the home, the pet never should be left alone with the children. All interactions must be supervised by an adult, or the pet must be confined away from children. Even during supervised interactions, all potential triggers must be identified so that they can be prevented or avoided. Alternately, muzzles may be appropriate for dogs in some situations. See the article by Luescher and Reisner elsewhere in this issue for more information on this problem in dogs and the article by Curtis found elsewhere in this issue for problems of feline aggression.

Suggestions for Safe Retrieval of Stolen Items

Many pets, primarily dogs, steal items in the household. Often this behavior results in the owner chasing the pet and eventually cornering the animal. Depending on the outcome of previous encounters (especially if they ended with punishment), the pet may respond aggressively when the person attempts to retrieve the item. Many owners insist on "winning" this encounter despite the animal's signalling that it is willing to bite. A way to retrieve items safely is discussed in the following paragraph.

This method is to be used only by an adult who has control of the dog and should not be used by children in the home. The only reason to attempt to retrieve an item is when an item is potentially dangerous to the dog or is highly valuable to the family. Initially the family member should get a highly valued reward (ie, table food). The pet then is shown the food from 5 to 6 feet away, and the owner gives the command to "come" while showing the pet the food. If

the dog leaves the item to approach, the owner should back up, call the dog again, and add, “sit.” This process is repeated two or three times without giving the dog the food reward until the dog is at least 15 to 20 feet from the object, preferably in another room. The dog then is given the food reward and, if possible, is taken gently by the collar and put into another room with a closed door or outside. Another option is to target train the dog so that it can be lured with the target instead of the food rewards. The target provides a more immediate pretrained method of teaching the dog to come for food without having to “decide” whether the food is sufficiently valuable. If the dog will not allow touching of the collar, it should not be attempted; rather, one should use another food reward to lead the dog into another room where the pet can be confined. After the dog is securely confined in an area away from the item, the item can be retrieved. Most importantly, the food-for-item exchange must never take place directly in front of the pet, because in most cases the animal will eat the food, return to the item, and perhaps bite the owner as well. This technique should be used only when it is absolutely essential that the item be removed from the pet and will not be effective unless the item offered is more valued than the one the pet has stolen.

Box 1 summarizes the techniques for managing aggression towards familiar people.

Aggressive Responses at Windows, Doors, Fences, and on the Arrival of Unfamiliar People

If territorial responses are problematic and/or extreme, the pet must be kept away from windows, doors, and fences (**Box 2**). Management might require blocking windows, restricting access to certain parts of the home, going outside with the dog, and/or using a leash and head collar both indoors and outdoors for additional control. The pet must never be left outside when no one is home. The pet (dog or cat) always must be confined before the door is opened.

Box 1: Managing aggression towards familiar people

- Avoid delectable food items except as a means of training and counterconditioning to improve the underlying problem.
- Feed the pet in secure confinement.
- Do not try to take an object from the pet.
- When not confined, the pet should be supervised to prevent stealing. Leaving a leash and head halter on the pet can provide safer and more effective control.
- When it is absolutely necessary to retrieve a stolen item, try to lure the pet at least 6 feet from the item using a food reward or target and then, if possible, confine the pet and go get the item.
- Avoid interactions that cause aggressive responses, including, but not limited to, wiping feet, trimming nails, hugging, pushing, and touching the pet while it is resting.

Box 2: Managing territorial responses at windows, doors, and fences and toward visitors

- Block access to areas where the stimuli are encountered. Cover windows and keep the pet out of rooms with a view to the outdoors.
- Always confine the pet before opening the door. Keep a leash handy nearby to facilitate compliance.
- Do not allow the animal outdoors unattended.
- Use a leash and head halter for additional control. The animal should be handled by an adult.
- Do not use retractable leashes.

Confinement is accomplished most easily by teaching a command that signals the pet to go to the confinement area. This task is practiced when no one is at the door so the pet can follow and obey the command reliably and accept confinement when there is no excitement or visitor. This acceptance increases the likelihood that compliance will occur at other times. If the pet will not go readily but can be led on a leash, a leash should be kept near the door, either draped over a doorknob or on a nearby piece of furniture. See the article by Curtis elsewhere in this issue for information on feline aggression toward strangers.

Aggressive Responses on Walks and Away from Home

Dogs that show aggression toward people or other dogs on walks should not go on walks. If walks cannot be avoided, they should be scheduled at low-traffic times or in areas where people are less likely to be encountered such as industrial parks (Box 3). Busy neighborhoods, downtown areas, parks, and sporting events must be avoided. If the stimulus is encountered during a walk, no matter how far it is from the owner and pet, they must leave the area quickly but

Box 3: Managing unwanted responses on walks

- Do not use retractable leashes.
- Use head halters or no-pull harnesses.
- Walk only one dog at a time.
- Walk during low-traffic times or in low-traffic areas.
- If the stimulus is encountered, the owner should move the dog out of the situation as soon as it is noted by immediately turning the other way, crossing the street, walking the dog past the stimulus if this can be accomplished with a leash and head halter at sufficient distance to avoid any confrontations, or have the pet sit and focus on the owner (again with a leash and head halter) at a sufficient distance so that the other pet can walk by.
- Avoid yelling, scolding, and leash corrections, which will increase arousal.

calmly by turning around, crossing the street, or entering a yard. See the article by Haug found elsewhere in this issue for more information on treatment.

Fighting Between Companion Dogs Within the Home

When dogs within a household fight, severe injury to one or both dogs and to the humans who attempt to separate them is possible. If two dogs are fighting, the owners should not attempt to separate them by grabbing their collars or necks but rather by picking the dogs up by their back legs and elevating the dog while walking backward. Once the dogs have ceased fighting, they should be separated and kept apart until calm. When the dogs are next introduced, both should be on leashes and under owner control. Head halters and muzzles provide an additional level of safety. The owners should request that the dogs sit or down quietly and see if the animals can be together without showing any aggressive or fearful responses.

Because fights between dogs often are elicited by food, owner attention, and high-arousal situations, these stimuli must be avoided [16]. Each dog should be fed in its own bowl in a separate location, and all food bowls should be picked up and put away once feeding time is over. The owners should attempt to control all interactions with the pets using commands to get the dogs to sit before any activity including petting.

Box 4 summarizes techniques for avoiding fighting between dogs.

Fighting Between Household Cats

When cats fight, they can become quite emotionally aroused, and fighting may continue unless the cats are separated until they calm down. Calming can take several hours to days depending on the temperament of the individual cat. Each cat should have food, water, and a litter box in the confinement area. Introductions through a closed door are a good place to start to assess if the cats are calm enough to see one another. Premature introductions often lead to resumption of fighting, so owners should be advised to keep the cats separated until they are calm and to use food rewards to facilitate re-introduction. See the article by Levine in this issue for more information on anxiety and fear in cats.

Box 4: Management of fighting between dogs

- Dogs should be separated when not supervised.
- Dogs must be separated for feeding and food preparation.
- Avoid high-arousal situations: greetings, going through doorways, answering the door.
- Use only quickly consumable treats, not long-lasting food rewards such as bones.
- Use leashes and tie downs when home to increase control and perhaps diminish fighting.

Problem Litter Box Behavior and Urine Spraying

Litter box problems and urine-spraying problems often respond in some degree to improved litter box hygiene and to increasing the number and placement of litter boxes [17].

For urine spraying, avoiding encounters with outdoor cats by blocking windows or keeping them away from the home is a useful management strategy. In some cases litter box usage problems seem to be associated with agonistic social interactions between cats, so treating those issues, adequate provisioning of resources, and separation of cats may be useful strategies. Preventing access to soiled areas by keeping doors closed and by cleaning soiled areas adequately also may help diminish house soiling.

Box 5 summarizes the management of litter box problems and urine spraying.

Canine House Soiling and Marking

Four important management issues can help improve house soiling and marking in dogs. First, owners must accompany their dogs outdoors to verify outdoor elimination. Unless they go outside with the dog, they have no way of knowing if the dog used the outdoor opportunity to empty its bladder and/or bowel. Second, they must supervise the dog when they are home and the dog is indoors. This supervision may require keeping the dog with them on a leash to avoid wandering and subsequent soiling. If they cannot observe the dog, it should be confined in an area that is easily cleaned. Finally, the owners must search the house daily to determine when and where soiling occurs.

Separation Anxiety and Noise Sensitivities

For some animals that have separation anxiety, offering day boarding until treatment options and/or medication have begun to change behavior is a good solution. For dogs that have noise sensitivities, getting the animal to a darkened area and using some white noise to cover the problematic signs can be useful (**Box 6**). More details are provided in the article by Simpson and Mills found elsewhere in this issue.

Box 5: Managing litter box problems and urine spraying

- Improve litter box hygiene by daily removal of waste material and weekly cleaning and refilling of boxes.
- Provide an adequate number of boxes at different locations.
- Separate cats that show agonistic interactions.
- Clean soiled areas adequately.
- Block access to soiled areas.

Box 6: Managing reactivity to noises

- Remain calm.
- Avoid punishment or assurance.
- Place pet in a darkened quiet area with an adult.
- Use some type of white noise (fan, loud rock and roll music) to block the sound.

Compulsive Disorders of the Skin and Locomotor Disorders

Research has indicated that compulsive disorders in dogs and cats that are presented as licking or chewing problems must have detailed and perhaps prolonged work-up and treatment before being labeled as compulsive disorders [18–20]. Therefore management entails appropriate medical care. Locomotor disorders may respond to increased control through head collars and a command–response relationship and increased activity and exercise as management options.

CONTROL DEVICES TO ENHANCE MANAGEMENT

Control devices can enhance compliance. These devices include fixed (not retractable) leashes, head halters, body harnesses, crates, and basket muzzles. These items can be used both in the home and outdoors. Care should be exercised when using basket muzzles because of the possibility of overheating, because panting is inhibited to some degree. Pretraining to wear a basket muzzle will aid in compliance and acceptance by both the owner and the pet. Motion sensors with or without a citronella collar can help keep pets out of certain areas (see the articles by Moffat and Haug found elsewhere in this issue for more information on management devices).

The clinician or a staff member should know how to fit these items and how to train dogs to accept them willingly. Many sources exist for the products and for advice on how to fit and use them. Video sources are also available at ABRIonline.org.

SUMMARY

Veterinarians can help clients who have problem pets at many levels. Education allows owners to better understand normal behavior, problem behavior, and the individual pet. Management solutions offer a useful tool for owners faced with behavior issues in their pets and allow veterinarians to intervene at a basic, helpful level. In some cases management steps and control devices improve the behavior and allow increased owner control and a reduction in the problem behavior. In other situations it may be only the first step in a treatment protocol. By offering management solutions, veterinarians can help owners who have problem pets begin on the road to recovery.

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