

# Designing Behavior Modification Plans

I would love to do more to help clients with their pets' behavior issues but need some direction on how to set up a behavior modification plan.

**A**dding behavior services need not be difficult. As with any other area of veterinary medicine, there are straightforward cases and referral-level cases. Owner complaints about a pet's behaviors often revolve around normal but unwanted behaviors. For these, designing appropriate interventions may not be that time-consuming.

## UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Get in the habit of asking behavior questions during routine visits (see **Box**, page 54). When the primary reason for a visit is a behavior problem, owners want to stop the behavior. Your goal is different: to change the behavior or teach the pet to perform an alternate, acceptable behavior in the same circumstance.

Your first step is to understand and get an accurate description of the target behavior. What exactly does it look like? How often does it happen? Where does it take place? Can the owner rank events in intensity and give you some idea of the frequency? Does the problem behavior put the pet, other animals, or people in danger? You need this information to structure your behavior modification plan and judge treatment success.

Discuss with the owner what the new behavior will look like. This is different from stopping the behavior. This discussion should draw attention



CONTINUES

## SUGGESTED BEHAVIOR QUESTIONS DURING ROUTINE VISITS

- Does your pet engage in any behaviors that you wish to change?
- How does your pet greet visitors to your home?
- Can you easily take your pet for a walk?
- Do you have any problems with barking and unruly behavior at doors, fences, and/or windows?
- Can your pet interact freely with visitors in your home?
- Are there any situations where your pet growls, snarls, hisses, scratches, snaps, or tries to bite you or others?

away from the problem behavior and instead focus on the appropriate behavior. Understand the client's expectations for change, determine how realistic they are, and establish what you need to do to achieve that end. The best-designed treatment plan is useless unless it provides what the owner needs, expects, and can implement.

### INTERIM MANAGEMENT

Be prepared to offer management solutions for the targeted problem behavior while you are teaching new tasks. The problem behavior strains the human-animal bond, creates tension, and often results in punishment, which in turn further damages the pet-owner relationship (see **Helping Pet Owners Manage Problem Behaviors**, October 2009, available at [cliniciansbrief.com](http://cliniciansbrief.com)). Once management is accomplished, training for alternate behaviors can begin. Some owners may be happy managing the behavior rather than changing it or replacing it with a new one.

### KEEP IT SIMPLE

As you begin to design a treatment plan, keep in mind that what you might be able to get a pet to do is probably vastly different from what the average pet owner can do. Veterinarians have generally owned and handled many more pets than the average client. As a result, we are attuned to subtle changes in behavior and can respond accordingly. Although we love animals, we are likely to view them more in line with their predilections and capabilities according to their species. Therefore, you must begin with simple, small steps that approximate the finished product. This entails creating clear and predictable communication between the owner and the pet and recognizing that as sentient beings, pets should have the ability to say "no."

### CREATING THE FOUNDATION

Most behavior modification plans start with foundation exercises. These small tasks teach the pet and owner basic control, calm behavior, and attention. The owner should keep training sessions short and teach each task separately at different times. Working on one controlled behavior at a time increases the chance of compliance and success.

The goal is to put a specific behavior under verbal control so that when asked, the pet knows exactly what to do and can perform the task reliably under calm and quiet conditions. The owner should label this behavioral task any way he or she wishes. For example, if the dog is to be taught to go into a kennel on com-



mand, the owner can say “kennel up,” “go to bed,” or any combination of words that make sense to the owner in order to convey the requirements of the task.

Basic control tasks include sit/stay or down/stay at a specific location, such as a bed or rug; go to place or into confinement on command; move away from something (eg, a window or door); or touch a body part or click stick on command. The list varies with the qualities of the new behavior you wish to structure through behavior modification.

### EARNING REWARDS

In dogs, food rewards facilitate the acquisition of the new tasks. A hierarchy of rewards is best: Higher-value rewards are used for acquiring a new and difficult task; lower-value rewards should be used for tasks that the dog already knows. In most cases, food is the preferred reward, but some pets prefer play or a chew toy instead.

For rewards to have value, the owner should give them to the pet only when they are earned for the performance of a requested task. Food rewards can be very small (the size of a raisin) to avoid satiation and obesity. Novel food rewards are often highly valued and can include peanut butter cracker bits, cheese-

flavored crackers, and cereal (note that these foods are easy to handle and keep in the pocket).

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Once each individual task can be performed well, the tasks are bundled together to yield the desired response. See the **Behavior Modification Plan** on page 56 for an example case.

Make sure to schedule follow-up by phone or in person every 7 to 10 days to assess progress. This also allows you to answer questions and make changes to keep the process moving forward.

Asking owners about pet behavior allows you to intervene early in the problem behavior and increase success. Breaking the tasks down into small increments allows owners to see success in the small steps and encourages them to proceed. This is a win-win situation for everyone involved.

CONTINUES

## TREATMENT AT A GLANCE

- Understand what the problem behavior looks like and how often it occurs.
- Determine what the appropriate behavior will look like.
- Discuss management.
- Create small steps that when joined together result in the final desired behavior.
- Follow up frequently to encourage the client and change the plan as needed.

### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- All training should occur during calm and quiet times, never during the event that causes the unwanted behavior to occur.
- If multiple dogs are in the home, the owner should train the dog exhibiting the problem behavior alone without the presence of other pets.
- In some cases, the use of control devices, such as head collars, leashes, and harnesses, makes teaching new tasks easier.





# Behavior Modification Plan

**TARGETED PROBLEM:**  
**BARKING AND JUMPING ON**  
**VISITORS WHO COME TO**  
**THE HOME**

**NEW DESIRED**  
**BEHAVIOR:**  
**SITTING CALMLY AND**  
**QUIETLY TO GREET**  
**PEOPLE WHO ENTER**  
**THE HOME**



## Components of the behavior modification plan:

- Teach the dog to sit and stay 4 to 6 feet away from the entry door.
- Teach the dog to “go” to the location on command
- Teach the dog to sit and stay at the location when opening and closing the door with no one outside.
- Teach the dog to sit and stay at the location when family members enter and exit the door.
- Teach the dog to sit and stay when family members stand outside the door.
- Teach the dog to sit and stay when family members approach to say “hello.”
- Attempt the new task with familiar visitors before attempting with unfamiliar visitors.

## Behavior products to augment learning and success:

- Head collars; examples include Gentle Leader ([premier.com](http://premier.com)), Halti ([coastalpet.com](http://coastalpet.com)), and Snoot Loop ([snootloop.com](http://snootloop.com))
- Manners Minder remote reward training system ([premier.com](http://premier.com))

## Additional key elements for success:

- Keep initial training sessions short.
- Once each small task is acquired, phase out food rewards.
- In some cases, consider using a tether to help keep the pet in place.

This form can be downloaded and printed for use in your clinic at [cliniciansbrief.com](http://cliniciansbrief.com).