

Debra F. Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB, Veterinary Behavior Consultations, St. Louis, Missouri

Helping Pet Owners Manage Problem Behaviors

I often have clients come in with complaints about their pets' behavior. How can I help them without doing an in-depth behavior consultation?



Whether or not you or a member of your staff does behavioral consultations, there are many management techniques that can help pet owners deal with behavioral issues in their animals.

First, Rule Out Disease

Because a metabolic disorder or pain can contribute to problem behaviors, the first step in management is a good physical examination to identify, treat, or exclude any medical conditions that may be contributory to the problem behavior. After medical problems have been resolved, however, old patterns of learned behavior may contribute to ongoing problematic responses.

Identify Problem Behavior

To implement management tools, identify the problematic behavior and then determine the frequency and intensity at which it occurs. This will often allow you to help the family identify and subsequently avoid the triggers. Be sure to understand the family dynamic and all people and pets involved in the problem situation to create management solutions that are practical and usable for the entire family.

The primary goal is avoiding triggers known to provoke the problem behavior and removing the pet from the triggering situation if necessary. This strategy helps provide safety for those who may come in contact with the pet and may help prevent or diminish escalation of the behavior. High arousal situations are not good learning situations; unless a pet is calm, settled, and relaxed, it is unlikely to learn something new. Therefore, initial behavioral modification is best done without the stimulus present.

continues

Implement Management Tools Interdog Aggression on Walks

The owner should avoid high-density dog areas and times on walks; if other dogs are encountered, the owners should create space between their dog and the other, and leave as soon as possible. Walks in less-populated areas, such as business parks and industrial parks, may be more manageable and provide safe exercise. Head collars can provide enhanced control. The dog should always be on a set-length leash; retractable leashes offer less control and should be avoided.

Owner-Directed Aggression

In this situation, a high priority is prevention of injury to family members. To accomplish this goal, the owner's strategies might include the following: avoid disturbing the pet when it is resting, keep the pet from sleeping on the owner's bed or couch, and feed the pet without disturbances to prevent food-related aggression. A history should include identifying specific situations during which the pet has become aggres-

sive so that a plan can be devised to avoid similar circumstances.

Aggression Toward Visitors

Providing safety for those who might encounter the animal is paramount. When visitors will be present, the dog or cat must be placed in another area before allowing the guests into the house. This confinement must be secure (eg, a room with a lock, a locked crate, or a securely fenced yard), and the animal should be placed into confinement by an adult. To facilitate catching a dog, a leash can be left by the door or left on the dog when someone is home and awake. If the visit is a planned one, the pet should be confined long before arrival of the guests.

Territorial Responses at Windows, Doors, & Fences

Prohibiting ongoing aggressive responses is the first step. Blocking visual access out windows or doors by restricting entry to the room or covering the windows and keeping the front door closed are useful strategies. When outdoors, the pet should be supervised and preferably wearing a head collar and leash held by an adult.

Separation Anxiety

If possible owners should try to avoid leaving the dog alone for periods that evoke the distress response. Such options as doggy day care, pet sitters, and day boarding might be useful. Pheromones and medication are often indicated as well.

Fighting Between Pets Within the Home

When dogs or cats have a tendency to fight, the animals should be supervised at all times or separated if supervision is not possible. For cats, allocation of such resources as food and water bowls and litter boxes can increase harmony. Separation while eating, owner control of toys and high arousal situations, and use of leashes and head collars may be helpful in homes where dogs are fighting.

Unruly, Destructive, & House-Soiling Issues

For dogs that are difficult to control in the home, having the dog wear a head collar and drag a leash when someone is home and awake will allow better control and redirection away from problematic responses. See **Aids & Resources** for food-dispensing toys to keep pets busy.

For dogs that get into the garbage or take food off the counter, some advance planning can help. Keep food-related garbage under the kitchen sink and use a baby lock to secure the cabinet. Place other food items up high or in cupboards to thwart counter "surfing."

For house-soiling dogs, be sure to go outdoors with the pet to confirm outdoor elimination and keep the dog nearby using a leash when home to monitor the need to eliminate. For house-soiling cats, be sure to provide plenty of clean litter boxes in private, quiet areas.



Modify Owner's Response Response to Behaviors

The owner's response to undesirable behavior must be calm and controlled. When something is found after the fact (eg, inappropriate elimination or destruction of property), there is nothing helpful to do but to clean it up and try to avoid the trigger circumstance in the future. If the pet is highly aroused and actively engaged in the undesirable behavior, the owner should try to remove the pet from the situation if she can safely do so or remove the trigger for the behavior.

Remaining calm, and giving direction to the pet for an alternative behavior, such as an obedience command the dog reliably knows, can be quite useful. If the pet is too aroused to follow a command, try "changing the subject" by offering another activity the pet may enjoy, such as a ride in the car, a treat, or special play item. This activity is used to divert the pet in a critical situation only; repeated use could inadvertently reinforce the undesirable behavior.

The goal is to avoid making the problem worse. Owners must also understand that situations with highly aroused, reactive, and upset animals do not make good training opportunities.

Punishment

Punishment must be avoided and owners counseled to avoid responding to undesirable behavior with interactive aggression and punishment. Animals in an aggressive or anxious state are highly aroused and reactive. Direct interactive punishment often escalates the problem, may aggravate the condition, and can result in injury to people or other animals. In addition, owners should avoid responding to undesirable behavior with comforting vocal intonation or touch. Comforting actions are very similar to praise. The dog may misinterpret this interaction and think the undesirable behavior is acceptable.



Adjunctive Tools

For some pets, the addition of pheromones to calm them can be a useful addition to the treatment plan. Control tools include head collars, muzzles (with appropriate training and precautions), calming caps, and body harnesses. Proper activity toys can help redirect energy appropriately.

Understand Limitations

Good management and control can help keep the behavior from escalating, and avoidance of triggers allows the owner time to work with the pet. It must be reiterated that *punishment is contraindicated*. Punishment can increase anxiety, aggression, and fear without changing behavior. In addition, it may serve to stop only the outward manifestations of the behavior without changing the underlying emotional state. This might make the behavior seem unpredictable and random because early warning signs are suppressed.

One of the most important goals in behavior therapy is changing the underlying emotional state. If the pet is no longer aggressively aroused, anxious, or fearful, then learning can begin. The owner should also understand the

Tx at a Glance

- Identify all triggers for the undesirable behavior
- Discuss useful and practical ways to avoid triggers
- Give specific suggestions by disorder
- Follow up with the owner to assess response
- Move to detailed treatment plans when ready

pet's limitations; undersocialized pets may never be comfortable in large groups or with unfamiliar people, and storm-phobic dogs may always want to hide when a storm is approaching. The pet does not have to go to all places; if problems occur on walks, in parks, or in the car, these areas must be avoided until new tasks are learned and the animal can reliably respond with new behaviors. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices. Article archived on cliniciansbrief.com