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# Effective Client Counseling for Behavior Issues

Although I try my best to help clients whose pets have behavior issues, sometimes it is difficult to communicate with them and encourage them to follow recommendations. Any helpful hints?



**L**ike any other aspect of veterinary medicine, taking a comprehensive history, determining a diagnosis, and formulating a treatment plan are essential components in behavior medicine. Owner involvement and understanding are indispensable for a treatment plan to be effective; however, ensuring owner comprehension and compliance can be a challenge. A good place to begin is to help the owner understand the behavior from the pet's point of view, which can then be augmented with detailed treatment information and good follow-up.

## Pet Owner's View

It is likely that many pet owners will own only 2 to 3 pets in their lifetimes. Therefore, their understanding and knowledge of pet behavior will be limited to what they have learned about that individual pet or others they have interacted with and/or what they have gleaned from other sources.

Without direction, an owner may get information from less than credible sources, resulting in inaccurate and perhaps harmful information. In

addition, most people know very little about animal behavior in general, so the responses they have chosen in regard to their pet's behavior may not be sound.

## Different Languages

It is very important to help owners understand the difference between human and animal communication, and how miscommunication leads to misunderstanding and unwanted responses. In addition, it is important to address myths and misunderstandings that might impede the treat-

continues

ment process, especially if the owner does not understand why the pet is performing the undesirable behavior.

One obstacle is the perception that our animal companions understand language. While it is accepted that dogs and cats can understand many words, phrases, and directions from humans, they cannot participate in a verbal 2-way conversation. Animals rely on postural, facial, and tonal cues to understand a social situation; therefore, what a human thinks he is communicating to the pet might be vastly different from what the pet perceives.<sup>1</sup>

Often the misunderstanding goes both ways—the human perception of what the pet is signaling may be quite different from what the pet is actually trying to communicate. The following are some common misunderstandings:

- Proximity does not always mean a willingness to interact: Some animals want to be closeby without being touched. Trying to interact with the animal may lead to aggressive responses, which owners find confusing because they feel their intent was not harmful.
- Stillness and nonmovement are not the same as relaxation: The entire body affect of the

pet must be considered; body posture, ear and tail placement, and facial expression tell us about the pet's mental state.

- Growls, snarls, hisses, swats, and snapping tell us animals are uncomfortable with a situation. Rather than simply suppressing these responses, our goal should be to change the underlying emotional affect to keep these responses from occurring.
- The animal picked a response it felt was appropriate for the situation: If we want to change an animal's behavior, we need to understand the animal's perspective and why it responded that way. Change usually entails teaching a new response, or allowing the pet to see that the situation is not threatening.
- Animals do not try to control or dominate humans.<sup>2</sup> In general, animals are either trying to prevent an adverse outcome or do not understand what is being asked of them.
- Pet responses are based on their perspective of the world: Dogs will always pick dog responses; cats will always pick cat responses. And these will be tempered by genetics and past experiences. We may consider a situation benign or expected, but our companion animals may perceive the situation differently.

- At the end of the day we want to change the underlying emotional state: If we can do that, hopefully outward behavior will change as well. Vice versa, changing behavior can sometimes change the emotional state.

## Making the Change

Helping pet owners understand the above issues allows them to understand what they can do to facilitate change. The next step is helping the client understand the specific behavior problem or issue, specific techniques to treat it, and how to observe and interpret the pet's behavior properly.

### First Things First

First, if the pet is in the same situation in which the unwanted responses have occurred, it is very likely they will occur again. Second, if we want the pet to pick another behavioral response, then we need to teach or elicit it. Third, because learning is impaired during times of high emotional arousal, which can lead to problem behaviors being performed and perfected, the new response must be learned in calm, quiet surroundings. Finally, we must control the intensity of the stimulus, allowing the animal to pay attention, avoid the unwanted response, and perform the correct task.

### Making It Reality

To translate the above instructions into reality, a few basic instructions for clients are often quite useful.

1. Once the triggers for unwanted behavior have been identified, they need to be avoided unless the intensity is controlled and the pet is being taught to avoid responding to them. Avoidance can take many forms; to increase compliance the practitioner should discuss several options for doing so and then work on making it easy to implement.

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2. Not all pets need to be in all places. If a pet has routinely shown discomfort or unwanted behavior in a situation or location, it should be avoided. Giving the owner permission to leave the dog at home (versus being in situations where unwanted responses occur, such as going to soccer games, the store, or outdoor cafe) or to confine the pet during certain situations is essential.
3. Simple control devices can work wonders. Leashes, head collars, body harnesses, crates, and baby gates all allow us to control where the pet is and often what they do.
4. Focus on the new behavior: It is much more productive to spend time discussing what the pet should do rather than focusing on what the pet should stop doing. This allows a program to be tailored to each individual situation.
5. Having basic control commands is key. Commands can vary with each individual pet; remember, commands provide clarity about what to do, but may or may not change the underlying emotional state.
6. Change is slow. Help the client understand how to assess changes in behavior. Will it be a change in the frequency, intensity, or duration of a problem behavior? And remind the client that the behavior may not go away entirely but, instead, be more controllable. There will always be situations in which an animal is at risk for repeating unwanted responses.

Changing problem behaviors can be accomplished much more easily when the pet owner understands basic principles of behavior and can look at the situation from the animal's perspective. In addition, if owners understand the specifics of behavior techniques and how to handle inevitable setbacks, they will have the tools to create positive outcomes for both themselves and their pets. ■

**See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.**  
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### Take-Home Messages

- Help clients understand canine and feline communication.
- Help clients understand behavior from the pet's perspective.
- Teaching a new behavior is better than punishing the unwanted one.
- Management of the situation will decrease the likelihood that the behavior will be repeated.
- All pets have limitations.