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UPDATE ON

Behavior Research

The field of veterinary behavioral medicine is growing rapidly; information on advances in knowledge and recent studies is available in a variety of formats, from conference sessions to published articles.



The following is a recap of 3 recent studies addressing different aspects of behavioral medicine that are applicable to everyday practice.

Training Methods

The relationship between training methods and the occurrence of behaviour problems in a population of domestic dogs. Blackwell EJ, Twells C, Seawright A, Casey RA. *Proceedings of the 6th International Veterinary Behavior Meeting*, June 2007.

This study looked at the relationship between different training methods and attendance at various categories of training classes with the occurrence of behavior problems in domestic dogs. Information was collected via questionnaires distributed to the dog-owning public at pet stores, veterinary practices, and 2 dog walking locations in the United Kingdom.

The owners were asked to rate the frequency of 36 behaviors that are commonly perceived as problematic by owners. They were also asked to provide the type of training classes attended with their dog (puppy socialization, agility, ring craft,

etc) and which type of training techniques were used (sound distraction, verbal praise, shutting away, etc).

Eighty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that their dogs were receiving some sort of training; of these dogs, 58% received informal training at home, 27% attended puppy socialization classes, 40% attended obedience classes, 12% participated in agility or fly ball, and 5% had attended classes for showing in the ring. Only 16% of the owners used positive reinforcement as the sole training tool; the remaining 84% used a combination of positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, negative punishment, and positive punishment.

Dogs trained with positive reinforcement showed significantly fewer behavior problems than those disciplined by other training aids. A fear of other dogs was significantly more likely in dogs whose owners used any type of punishment in their training. Dogs trained at home demonstrated significantly more problems than those that attended classes and home training was more likely to be associated with use of physical corrections and inconsistent interactions between owner and dog. Attendance at agility classes was significantly associated with reduction in problem behaviors.

Take-Home Message

Attendance at training classes can help reduce the number of behavior problems in dogs and positive reinforcement training appears to also be associated with a reduction in behavior problems. Veterinarians should ask clients whether their dogs are attending classes and should advise clients to use positive training methods for the best results.

Drinking Preferences

Drinking water preferences in the cat. Wooding B, Mills DS. *Proceedings of the 6th International Veterinary Behavior Meeting*, June 2007.

The drinking behaviors and preferences in cats were investigated using cats in a rescue center. The study was double blinded and each cat was exposed to 2 water sources (local tap water and purified water) over a 48-hour period. The bowls were identical in shape, different in color, and the amount of water consumed was measured and the bowl refilled every 12 hours. The study was also designed to control for right or left preferences in placement.

The results showed that cats drank more water during the day than night. The only factor found to be significant on statistical analysis was the water source: cats preferred tap water over purified water.



Take-Home Message

Perhaps keeping the water source constant and providing tap water might help improve water consumption in stressed cats.

Aggression Toward Children

Behavioral assessment of child-directed

canine aggression. Reisner IR, Shofer FS, Nance ML. *Injury Prevention* 13:348-351, 2007.

This study was a retrospective case series that examined medical records of dogs presented by referral to a university veterinary hospital for aggression. All dogs had bitten a child and behavioral data collected included age of victim, familiarity with dog, and circumstances of bites.

The study reviewed records of bites to 111 children. Children younger than 6 years old were most commonly bitten in association with resource guarding (44%), whereas older children were most commonly bitten in association with territory guarding (23%). Food guarding was the most common circumstance for bites to familiar children (42%) and territory guarding for bites to unfamiliar children (53%).

The behavioral assessment and screening of the 103 dogs examined revealed resource guarding (61%) and discipline measures (59%) as the most common stimuli for aggression. Anxiety screens revealed abnormalities in 77%, meaning that they showed anxiety in various circumstances. Potential contributory medical conditions were identified or suspected in 50% of dogs. Orthopedic (20%) and dermatologic (20%) conditions were most commonly identified.

When history before presentation was known, 66% of dogs had never previously bitten a child, and 19% had never bitten any human. However, a history of aggressive behavior such as snarling was common. Most dogs (93%) were neutered, and 66% of owners had taken their dogs to obedience training classes.

In this study, neutering and obedience classes did not seem to prevent future biting. However, anxiety and possible painful medical conditions should be considered potential reasons for aggressive behavior in dogs. ■

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Take-Home Message

Dog bites to children occurring around food and resources are quite common. Unfamiliar children are often bitten near the dog's territory whether or not they were interacting with the dog. Owners should be advised always to supervise dog/child interactions or separate children from dogs during feeding times or when visiting children are present (if they do not know how the dog will behave). All aggressive indicators should be taken seriously, including baring of teeth.