



Research

Efficacy of written behavioral advice for separation-related behavior problems in dogs newly adopted from a rehoming center



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ABSTRACT

Separation anxiety/separation-related behavior problems (SA/SRB) are a significant cause of abandonment and failure of rehoming in dogs. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of providing written advice to adopters of dogs, aimed at reducing the risk of SA/SRB occurring in the new home. An opportunity sample of 176 dogs was taken from animals rehomed over a 13-month period. Adopters of dogs were allocated alternately to 2 groups, experimental (treatment) and no treatment (control). Adopters in the control group were given advice about healthcare. Adopters in the treatment group received behavioral advice, designed to prevent SA/SRB. Efficacy of the advice was measured 12 weeks after rehoming, when owners were asked to complete a postal questionnaire detailing their dog's behavior when alone, as well as other factors previously suggested to influence the occurrence of SA/SRB. Overall, 53 (30%) of the dogs were reported to show SA/SRB (38% of the control group and 22% of the treatment group). Younger dogs were more likely to show SA/SRB and neutered females showed lower levels of SA/SRB. Although compliance with the advice was generally poor and varied between recommendations, dogs in the control group were more likely to show signs of SA/SRB than those in the treatment group, and hence the provision of written advice to adopters appears to be effective in reducing the development of SA/SRB after rehoming.

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Introduction

Problems with separation anxiety/separation-related behavior (SA/SRB) in dogs are characterized by unwanted behaviors that only occur when the dog is separated from its owner. The most common behavioral signs are destructive behavior, often occurring near the site of the owner's most recent departure, various types of vocalization, and inappropriate elimination (McCrave, 1991; Lund & Jorgensen, 1999). Although urination and defecation may be nonspecific signs of anxiety, destructiveness and excessive vocalization are suggested to be attempts by the dog to restore contact with the owner by escaping, or maintaining vocal contact (Voith & Borchelt, 1985a; McCrave, 1991; Serpell & Jagoe, 1995; Schwartz, 2003). Less frequently reported signs include excessive salivation, anorexia, self-mutilation, repetitive behavior, over-activity,

aggression toward the owner at time of departure, and gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhea (Voith & Borchelt 1996; Blackwell et al., 2006). For a diagnosis of SA/SRB to be made, other causes of these behavioral signs, such as inadequate house training, puppy chewing, playing, or barking at specific stimuli, must be ruled out (McCrave, 1991; Voith & Borchelt, 1996; Blackwell et al., 2006).

Undesired behaviors when owners leave their dogs at home alone are a common reason for dogs to be referred for behavior treatment. In the USA, for example, separation problems make up between 20% and 40% of the referral population (Voith and Borchelt, 1996; Simpson, 2000). In the UK, a longitudinal study of Labrador retrievers and border collies found that over 50% of dogs had displayed some SRB by 18 months of age (Bradshaw et al., 2002b). In addition, questionnaire surveys of dog walkers carried out in different locations in Southern England revealed that 13% of dogs from the general population were currently exhibiting SA/SRB and a further 11% had done so at some time in the past (Bradshaw et al., 2002a; Bradshaw et al., 2002b). Despite these figures being surprisingly high, they are likely to be an under-representation of the total numbers of dogs showing signs of SA/SRB. By their very

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nature, these behaviors occur when owners are not home, and unless evidence of destruction or elimination is present on their return, or neighbors complain about vocalization, separation-related problems can potentially remain unnoticed by owners. All these patterns of behavior are likely to be expressions of chronic underlying anxiety and/or stress, and therefore indicate a significant and widespread welfare deficit among pet dogs worldwide. Dogs at rehoming centers showing higher levels of SA/SRB in a test that predicts subsequent SA/SRB in the home situation also showed pessimistic-like behavior in a cognitive bias test of affective state (Mendl et al., 2010).

The extent of welfare issue is substantiated by the large proportion of dogs relinquished to rehoming organizations because of SA/SRBs (Miller et al., 1996). In a questionnaire study of owners relinquishing pets to 12 rescue centers in the USA (Salman et al., 1998), 32% of dog owners reported the dog had “soiled in the house,” 37% reported “damage to the house,” and 43% reported the dog as being “too noisy,” although it is not possible to ascertain from their data the proportion that showed these behaviors in response to separation. Diesel and colleagues (2010), found that undesired behavior was the most common reason for owners to relinquish dogs in the UK. Behaviors associated with SA/SRB such as barking, destruction, and eliminating making up a significant component of these undesired behaviors, although it is unclear from the data whether these were associated with owner absence. Others have estimated that 33% of all dogs handed into rescue and rehoming centers because of behavior problems show unwanted behaviors related to separation (Bailey, 1992). In addition, rehomed pets are returned to rescue centers in significant numbers. Of dogs rehomed by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), 16% were returned, and 68% of these were returned due to problem behavior (Ledger et al., 1995). Separation-related behavioral concerns thus appear to be significant causes of both abandonment of dogs and a common contributor to failure of rehoming (Herron et al., 2014). However, little attention has been paid to the effect of providing specific advice to new owners of dogs to reduce the risk of SA/SRB occurring on entering a new home.

The primary aim of this study was to assess the efficacy of providing members of the public adopting adult dogs from a rehoming facility with generic written advice as a prophylactic tool for reducing the incidence of SRB in the new home. Secondary aims were to investigate the extent to which owners in the treatment group complied with the written advice provided, and to investigate the extent to which other aspects of dogs' behavior may be associated with SA/SRB occurrence in the control group.

Methods

Subjects

An opportunity (convenience) sample of 306 dogs of any breed, sex, age, size, or neuter status, was taken from animals rehomed by the William and Patricia Venton RSPCA animal center in Cornwall over a 13-month period. All adopters were asked by reception staff to complete a consent form and supply contact details at the time of adopting their dog. They were then allocated alternately to 2 groups, experimental (treatment) and no treatment (control), at the time of rehoming. Adopters of dogs in the control group were given a leaflet containing general advice about vaccinations and worming. Adopters of dogs in the treatment group received a leaflet giving behavioral advice, adapted from a behavior modification program previously validated for the treatment of SRB problems (Blackwell et al., 2006). The advice was adapted to make it relevant to newly adopted dogs entering the household for the first time rather than pets that had been living in the home for at least

6 months. Staff were asked to encourage owners to read the leaflets but to provide no other specific behavioral advice beyond normal practice.

Preventative advice

The behavioral advice required adopters to control all social interactions with their dog. In practical terms, this meant that they were responsible for initiating and ending social interactions with their dog. Although there was no limit to the overall level of interaction, adopters were advised to only initiate interaction when the dog was showing relaxed behavior and to cease interaction if the dog showed anxious, attention seeking, or other undesirable behavior, including excessive greeting when they returned home. Adopters were also specifically requested not to punish their dog on returning home, regardless of whether the dog had been destructive, eliminated indoors, or performed any other unwanted behavior. Adopters were advised to exercise the dog before departing, which may increase the likelihood that it would relax while they were out, and to provide enrichment in the form of toys or treats, to provide the opportunity for their dog could occupy itself when it was left alone. A systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning program, involving leaving the dog for gradually increasing periods, was also included, intended to prevent the dog from becoming anxious from the first time it was left alone. This technique involved starting at a level at which the dog was not anxious, for example, taking just 1 step away from where the dog was lying, and then, very gradually (so slowly that the dog should not notice any difference between the stages nor ever become anxious), the distance and time for which the owner and dog were parted was increased. With some dogs, this would be a step by step process, while others would remain relaxed for longer periods more quickly, depending on prior experience. During this process, adopters were advised not to leave the dog alone at other times during this process. If owners had to leave the dog alone at some point during the period of desensitization, then they were advised to leave it in a different context from the desensitization, for example, in a different location. To associate the adopter's absence with something positive, they were advised to give the dog a long-lasting food treat while the desensitization session was carried out. The advice program was designed to be implemented immediately on collection of the dog.

Follow-up

Efficacy of the advice was measured by contacting the named adopter by post, 12 weeks after rehoming, and asking them to complete and return a 47-question postal questionnaire, that had previously been tested in a pilot study with 20 new adopters. Most questions were closed, with adopters provided with a selection of possible categories to choose from. The questionnaire included sections on the household composition, details of the dog's husbandry and interactions with the adopter. Adopters were also asked to describe their pet's behavior at specific times, for example, when they went into another room and the dog was prevented from following them, as well as its behavior when left alone. Adopters were required to report details of their dog's patterns of behavior when left alone, as well as its behavior immediately before they left the dog alone and on returning home. The dog was classed as exhibiting SA/SRB if it showed destructive behavior, eliminating indoors, repetitive behavior, or vocalization, only when separated from the owner or adopter, and did not show these behaviors when people were present (Overall, 2013). The frequency and latency to show SA/SRB were also requested. The questionnaire also explored other factors which have been hypothesized to influence the

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