



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Veterinary Behavior

journal homepage: www.journalvetbehavior.com

Research

Effects of preadoption counseling on the prevention of separation anxiety in newly adopted shelter dogs

Meghan E. Herron^{a,*}, Linda K. Lord^b, Sarah E. Husseini^c^a Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences, The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Columbus, Ohio^b Department of Veterinary Preventive Medicine, The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Columbus, Ohio^c The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Columbus, Ohio

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 May 2013

Received in revised form

28 August 2013

Accepted 12 September 2013

Available online 11 November 2013

Keywords:

canine
behavior
shelter
separation anxiety

ABSTRACT

Separation anxiety is one of the more prevalent and difficult to treat behavior problems in dogs. The associated behaviors can be undesirable to dog owners and damage the human animal bond, leading to relinquishment or return to an animal shelter. Due to the high prevalence of separation related problems in recently adopted shelter dogs, shelter staff hold a critical role in advising and educating owners on how to prevent separation anxiety post-adoption. The aim of this study was to propose a form of that preventive counseling as a means of preventing the development of separation anxiety in recently adopted shelter dogs. The efficacy of preadoption counseling in the education and prevention of separation anxiety problems was tested in a prospective, randomized, parallel-group study. Participants included 133 new owners of dogs 6 months of age and older. At the time of adoption, sixty-six of these owners were randomly selected to receive five minutes of counseling on the prevention of separation anxiety, while the remaining sixty-seven owners served as the controls. A follow-up survey regarding the signs associated with separation anxiety and other potentially related behaviors was conducted one month post adoption. Results showed that 19 owners reported their dogs as having separation anxiety. There was no significant effect of adoption counseling on the prevention of separation anxiety. Owners in both groups were equally as likely to perform most of the recommendations given during counseling. Dogs that were reported to have separation anxiety were significantly more likely than dogs without reported separation anxiety to show nervous or panicked behavior as the owner prepared to leave ($P = 0.0001$) and were more likely to be reported as being “needy” ($P = 0.031$). Having another dog in the home was not protective against the development of separation anxiety. Owners in the counseling group were more likely than those in the control group to put food inside a toy at the time of leaving the dog home alone ($P = 0.0001$), suggesting the counseling recommendations were indeed followed by the owners. Owner compliance supports the idea that counseling is a useful tool for owners. Separation anxiety is a disorder whose course may be difficult to alter in recently adopted shelter dogs using only basic, interventional information. Brief counseling and a toy do not effectively prevent the occurrence of this complex behavioral condition. Further investigation should be done to find more specific, effective prevention tools for owners to use in the home to minimize the development of separation anxiety and shelter should be prepared to provide interventional resources to owners whose dogs develop separation anxiety despite these efforts.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Separation anxiety, defined here as distress in the absence of an attachment figure, is one of the more prevalent behavior problems in dogs and treatment can be challenging (Takeuchi et al., 2000b, Bamberger and Houpt, 2006). Commonly reported

separation-related problems that lead to a diagnosis of separation anxiety may include destructive behavior, self-injurious behavior, inappropriate urination and defecation, and vocalization associated with distress that occurs only in the owner's absence (Sherman and Mills, 2008). These behaviors can be undesirable to dog owners and may damage the human–animal bond, leading to relinquishment or return to an animal shelter (Salman et al., 2000). Recognition of problematic behaviors is critical in recently adopted animals because the human animal bond has

* Address for reprint requests and correspondence: Meghan E. Herron, DVM, OSU-VMC, 601 Vernon L. Tharp St., Columbus, Ohio 43210, Tel: 614-292-3551.

E-mail address: Meghan.Herron@cvm.osu.edu (M.E. Herron).

had little time to develop and the owners may not yet be committed to the dogs. Even dogs whose owners pursue behavioral therapy may fail to improve sufficiently for the owners' needs and be subsequently euthanized or relinquished (Takeuchi et al. 2000a, Takeuchi et al., 2000b). Several factors have been suggested to predispose certain dogs for the development of separation anxiety, including long periods with the owner without being left alone, periods of kennel housing, family move to a new house or apartment, and loss of a family pet (McGreevy and Masters, 2008; Sherman and Mills, 2008). Adoption from an animal shelter has been suggested as a predisposing factor for the development of separation anxiety in dogs (Serpell, 1995). Whether the separation-related behavior problems lead to relinquishment, or the abandonment/rehoming process put the dog at risk for behavioral pathology in the new home remains unknown. Regardless, considering the risk the development of separation anxiety poses to the adopted dog population, shelter staff may play a critical role in advising and educating owners on how to prevent separation anxiety after adoption.

Most veterinary and behavioral professionals will agree that behavior problems, like many medical problems, are best treated through prevention (Patronek and Dodman, 1999). Cottam et al. (2008) found that written and verbal communication, without the direct interaction of the dog with a clinician, can be an effective method for assessing and managing canine separation anxiety. Providing verbal advice on how to prevent separation anxiety in rehomed dogs has been shown to have a protective effect against the development of separation related problems after adoption (Blackwell et al., 2005). We studied whether preventive counseling in the form of written and verbal communication at the time of pet adoption could help prevent the development of separation anxiety, thereby reducing pet relinquishment and euthanasia. We also obtained information on the prevalence of separation anxiety in shelter dogs after adoption.

Materials and methods

Enrollment

Participants were recruited between the months of July and August 2011 from a dog shelter.^a This county shelter has primary responsibility for control of stray dogs and enforcement of state laws regarding stray dogs and offers open admission for owner-released dogs. The shelter impounded approximately 13,000 dogs in 2011.^b

Upon adoption, new owners of dogs 6 months of age and older were asked by adoption clerks, using a prewritten Ohio State University–approved script, to participate in a voluntary follow-up study conducted by the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Adopters were informed that a follow-up telephone interview, lasting approximately 5 minutes, would be conducted 1 month after adoption. As an incentive for participation, new owners were offered a free gift immediately upon enrollment. Signed consent and contact information were obtained from the adoptive families.

Puppies younger than 6 months of age were excluded from the study. Puppies eliminate more frequently than adults and destructive chewing is one of the first forms of play to develop in young puppies (Haupt, 2005). Because the presence of destructive chewing and house soiling associated with incomplete house training might confound the diagnosis of separation anxiety, we

excluded this population. Given that most shelter dogs have unknown histories, ages reported by owners for the study were based on approximations assigned by shelter staff veterinarians. All male dogs were castrated and all female dogs were ovariohysterectomized before adoption, per shelter rules.

Group assignment

To avoid imbalance in the number of participants in each group, blocked randomization with a block size of 20 was used (Friedman, 1998). Randomization for group assignment was performed using a computerized random number generator. The consent forms were then arranged in this specific order for researchers to know which group to assign each participant. Enrollment forms were color-coded for assignment into either counseling (treatment) or non-counseling (control) groups.

Participants in the treatment group received a 5-minute preadoption counseling session regarding prevention of separation anxiety, a written handout (Appendix) summarizing this counseling, and a food dispensing toy^c to be used as part of separation anxiety prevention. Participants in the control group received a decorated bandana as a free gift but were not given counseling or the handout. Counseling included a description of the common signs of separation anxiety, including inappropriate elimination in the house, destructive behavior, escaping a room or crate, vocalization, and self-mutilation (overgrooming), all of which would be required to be displayed in the absence of the owner or other attachment figure (Landsberg et al., 2003; Schwartz, 2003; Sherman and Mills, 2008). Owners were given guidelines about behavioral interactions to implement at home with the intent to reduce the development of separation anxiety. The counseling information and recommendations were based on the existing veterinary literature. Information included the common recommendations such as the designation of a safe home alone area that would prevent the dog from having access to dangerous items, 20 minutes of physical exercise before departures as a means of alleviating anxiety and reducing excess energy that may contribute to anxious behaviors, encouraging the dog to learn to feel safe regardless of owner presence, and downplaying departures and arrivals so as not to increase arousal during these times (Schwartz, 2003; Horowitz and Neilson, 2008; McGreevy and Masters, 2008; Sherman and Mills, 2008). Finally, owners were advised to avoid the use of punishment for undesirable behaviors upon their return that occur when the pet is alone. This advice was based on the fact that the use of confrontation or threat to change behavior does not address the underlying anxiety problem, may lead to fear or aggression toward the owner, and does not truly result in punishment of the behavior because the timing is not contingent on the behavior (Mills, 1997; Herron et al., 2009). Food is an unconditioned stimulus that reflexively elicits a positive emotional response when eaten; therefore, owners were also encouraged to provide a food-stuffed toy when leaving their dog home alone. Proper crate-training instructions were provided for those in the treatment group in case they elected to use a crate when leaving the dog home alone. These instructions were given with the intent to prevent a confounding factor of confinement-induced panic interfering with signs of separation anxiety (Overall, 2003).

^a Franklin County Dog Shelter, 1731 Alum Creek Dr., Columbus, OH 43207.

^b Franklin County Dog Shelter Impound Totals, 2005, available from the corresponding author upon request.

^c Kong®.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/2398807>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/2398807>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)