

Common Sense Behavior Modification: A Guide for Practitioners

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KEYWORDS

- Positive reinforcement • Control devices • Aggression • Behavior modification • Management

KEY POINTS

- Behavior problems are often given as a reason for pet relinquishment to shelters.
- When presented with any behavior problem, veterinarians should perform a thorough physical examination (including neurologic and orthopedic examination) and a minimum database, including a complete blood cell count (CBC), chemistry panel, and total T4 and free T4 by equilibrium dialysis if the T4 is low, to rule out any medical contributions.
- Veterinarians should be a source of information regarding management, safety, and basic behavior modification for common behavior problems.
- Additionally, various control devices offer pet owners the ability to better manage their pets in difficult situations.

INTRODUCTION

Behavior problems can break the human-animal bond, increasing the likelihood for relinquishment and/or euthanasia. Research has confirmed that behavior problems continue to be a top reason pet owners relinquish their pets to shelters.^{1–4} Aggression toward people and other animals is the number one reason given for dogs and the number 2 behavioral explanation given for cats.^{1,2} If a veterinary practitioner does not identify problematic behaviors, these pets are left at risk. Yet the opportunity for veterinarians to intervene and help exists only if they use it. One regional shelter study found that 70% of dogs and 50% of cats had visited their veterinarian at least once in the year prior to being relinquished to a shelter.⁵ Active behavioral screening and intervention by a veterinarian might have saved these pets from relinquishment. Many resources are available that contain behavior questionnaires and evaluations used for

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Box 1**Resources for behavior evaluations and questionnaires**

- Horwitz D, Mills D, editors. BSAVA manual of canine and feline behavioural medicine, 2nd edition. Quedgeley (Gloucester): British Small Animal Veterinary Association; 2009.
- Landsberg G, Hunthausen W, Ackerman L. Handbook of behavior problems of the dog and cat, 3rd edition. Elsevier Saunders; 2012.
- Horwitz D, Neilson J. Blackwell's five-minute veterinary consult clinical companion: canine and feline behavior. Ames (IA): Blackwell Publishing; 2007.
- Overall K. Manual of clinical behavioral medicine for dogs and cats. St Louis (MO): Elsevier Mosby; 2013.

screening purposes (**Box 1**); consequently, this topic is not covered here. Once a practitioner has identified a behavior requiring change, owners need practical guidance and easily implemented solutions for behavior modification. Rather than needing to be skilled in all types of behavioral interventions, practitioners can arm themselves with basic behavioral advice and solutions to help ameliorate many problem behaviors.

What an owner considers an undesirable behavior may be an ethologically normal or adaptive behavior for the pet. For example, urine marking is a normal behavior performed by cats and dogs for signaling purposes⁶ yet most pet owners find it highly objectionable. At its most basic motivation, aggression is merely a behavioral strategy that a pet uses in a social interaction to avoid or end an unwanted encounter and to relieve underlying fear or anxiety. It is imperative that veterinarians educate owners on what constitutes both normal and abnormal behavior and how to eliminate an unwanted behavior by teaching and reinforcing desirable behaviors. The focus should be on determining what pets are communicating by their behavior, why they are performing the behavior, and how owners can intervene to help. Most importantly, owners should strive to use humane, force-free, and kind methods when attempting to change behavior. Creating fear or anxiety through the use of inappropriate punishment or painful techniques only serves to damage the human-animal bond, compromise animal welfare, and increase rather than decrease fear, anxiety, and the potential for aggression.

The behavior modification detailed throughout this article can be used in a veterinary practice in a variety of ways. Individual client counseling can be performed by a clinician, skilled technician, or trusted trainer during a regularly scheduled appointment. Clinics can alternatively offer behavior seminars or group classes that focus on problem behaviors. Clinics can create their own handouts on the subjects or use one of the many written handouts commercially available from a trusted resource: a board-certified veterinary behaviorist, a certified applied animal behaviorist, or a positive method trainer. Behavior counseling may be beyond the capacity of what clinicians are comfortable with or even wish to offer as a service. All clinicians should, however, at the least, screen for behavioral problems, rule out medical causes for behavior, and offer some management solutions and referral to a behavior specialist when necessary. It is imperative that clinics use and recommend the use of a positive trainer or behaviorist. Web sites to help locate a behaviorist (Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Behaviorists or Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist) or trainer are found in an article elsewhere in this issue.

PROVIDING SPECIES-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION ON DOG AND CAT BEHAVIOR

Canine aggression is a serious behavioral problem and, when directed toward people, is also dangerous. Inherent in any intervention is the requirement to discard outdated

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