



Kingsbrook Animal Hospital

5322 New Design Road, Frederick, MD, 21703

Phone: (301) 631-6900

Website: KingsbrookVet.com

Behavior Counseling – Getting Started

Why might my pet have behavior problems?

Jumping up, pulling and lunging, digging, garbage raiding, stealing, chewing, barking, house soiling, and even some forms of aggression such as possessiveness and territorial guarding may all be normal for a dog or cat, but are unacceptable behaviors to most owners. Treatment of these problems will focus on environmental management and behavior modification, although there may be limits to what can be achieved depending on the problem, the pet, and the household. The prognosis in these cases varies with the breed, the pet, its background, the problem, the ability of the family to implement the necessary changes, and the expectations of the family.

Abnormal behaviors for a species might include states of panic, phobias, anxiety disorders, compulsive disorders, and certain forms of aggression. These behaviors might be more difficult to control through behavior modification alone, and the prognosis may be more guarded. Regardless of cause, if the pet's fear, anxiety, or level of arousal is sufficiently intense, it will be necessary to find a protocol that will calm the pet so that behavior modification can be effectively implemented.



"Behavior problems may be a result of normal behaviors that are unacceptable to the owners or may be an abnormal behavior for that species."

Because medical problems can be the cause or a contributing factor to behavior problems, these should be entirely ruled out before beginning treatment.

Can all problems be treated?

Unfortunately, it may be impractical to resolve many problems, especially those that are abnormal, have a strong genetic component, have been strongly ingrained as a result of early experience, and those that involve fear, anxiety, or aggression.

"Aggressive cases can pose a threat; determining whether it is safe to proceed is the primary consideration."

However, depending on the situation, many problems can be improved to a level that the family can accept. Therefore, the first step is for you and your consultant to determine the prognosis, including the limits on what you can realistically expect. Aggressive cases can pose a threat to the safety of the owner, pet, or other pets, and regardless of whether they are normal or abnormal behaviors, determining whether it is safe to proceed is the primary consideration.

How should I get started?

We have a number of handouts with basic training advice that are designed to help puppy and kitten owners get started on the right track, as well as handouts specifically designed to prevent and treat some of the more common behavior problems. However, for those behavior problems that require more than simple training and management, some initial guidance with a veterinary behaviorist is advisable. A thorough understanding of environmental management, learning principles, and how to modify behavior is necessary in those situations in which the pet is anxious, fearful, highly aroused, phobic, or displaying any aggression.

What common steps are required to treat anxious, fearful, emotionally aroused, and aggressive pets?

1. The first step is to **identify each situation** in which the problem might arise and prevent exposure until such time as you have sufficient control through retraining to start behavior modification. This generally involves environmental management to keep the pet away from the areas where problems might arise or avoiding potentially problematic situations and locations. This is particularly important for dogs that are fearful and aggressive.

2. **Provide sufficient enrichment to meet the dog's daily mental and physical requirements.** The quality, length, type, and frequency of these needs vary greatly with age, household, and the inherited characteristics of the breed and individual, including the work or function for which the dog was bred. By providing outlets and opportunities for social interactions, play and exploration, elimination, feeding, and sleeping, you help to ensure that the dog's needs have been adequately satisfied. By making each of these a regular and predictable part of the pet's daily routine, the pet gains control of its environment by learning when, where, and how each of these basic needs will be met.

3. **Ensure that all consequences are predictable.**

A. By teaching your pet which behaviors earn rewards and which behaviors do not, and by being consistent, you teach the pet how to gain control over its rewards, while at the same time how to exhibit behaviors that are desirable to the owner. Inconsistent consequences or inappropriate timing can lead to anxiety or conflict. Anxiety and conflict states may delay or prevent learning because the pet does not know how to control the outcome and/or what the appropriate response would be to avoid punishment or to get a reward. The end result may be a pet that cannot be effectively trained, becomes increasingly anxious, displays conflict-induced behaviors, or learns inappropriate behaviors. By clearly identifying each reward and showing the pet which behaviors earn each of these rewards (while avoiding use of these rewards at other times), you can ensure that the behaviors that are desirable to the pet are also the behaviors that are desirable to you.

B. Avoid punishment, as it does not train what is desired and, if not immediately and consistently applied, will further add to the pet's conflict or anxiety. Another potential problem with any form of punishment is that it may cause fear, anxiety, or defensive behavior toward the punisher; the pet may cease the behavior only in the presence of the punisher; or the pet may perceive the owner's response as a form of reinforcement.

4. **Use reinforcement-based training** to teach the pet which behaviors will achieve desirable consequences. The pet must also learn cues or commands (whether verbal or visual) that direct it to perform these behaviors when required. To resolve virtually any behavior problem, it is essential to replace the pet's current response with a behavior that is desirable. Before any exposure to the problem situation can begin, training the pet to perform the new behavior successfully is required. If you cannot successfully get your pet to perform the desirable behavior in the absence of distractions, you will not be able to



get compliance to your commands in the presence of stimuli that cause the problem behavior to occur. Therefore, clicker training, target training, and head halter training can be useful tools in reinforcement-based training for better communication and greater success.

5. Once the pet successfully displays the desired behavior, you can **gradually proceed to training in the problem situation**. If at all possible, you should expose the pet to a problem situation in which the stimulus is sufficiently mild (controlled exposure) that you can achieve desirable outcomes and reinforce your pet (response substitution). When the pet is fearful and anxious, then pairing favored rewards with minimal levels of the stimulus can change the pet's emotional reaction to the stimulus to one that is positive. You can then proceed by gradually adding more intense stimuli.

6. To succeed, it will be necessary to **develop gradients of rewards and stimulus intensity** and to start with mild enough levels of the stimulus that the pet will take the favored reward. With repetition of the exercise, the pet can learn to associate the previously fear or aggression evoking stimulus with its favored rewards, so that the favored rewards can then be paired with progressively more intense levels of the stimulus.

7. **Have realistic expectations**. Before beginning, it is necessary to identify the severity of fear and anxiety (panic, phobia, aggression) and to determine whether alternative training techniques, control devices, or drugs may be useful and whether further improvement is practical. In some cases, the behavior may be improved but may not be resolved or improved enough to make the family comfortable with the outcome. If drugs, control devices, and training techniques do not ensure human safety, or if the long-term well-being of the pet is likely to be compromised, then the decision of whether the pet can safely be kept in the home will need to be made.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM

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