

Behavior Problems

Aggression

An animal that threatens another animal or human by growling, hissing, baring teeth, snapping or biting presents a danger to others. There are many reasons an animal may behave aggressively, including fear, food or object possessiveness, territorial or protective behavior. It is necessary to obtain a complete behavioral history through detailed information gathering and direct observation of the animal in his own environment before a diagnosis and recommendations can be made. This can't be accomplished over the phone or via email; however, we can provide detailed handouts explaining the causes of aggression and procedures that should be avoided because they may make the problem worse.

The first step is to have a veterinarian examine your pet to evaluate him for possible medical reasons for the aggressive behavior. The next step is to seek the services of an animal behavior specialist (see below for tips on finding professional help).

Phobias

Some animals, usually dogs, may develop intense, irrational fears, including fear of loud noises or fear of being left alone. Many phobias can be successfully treated using a combination of behavior modification and short-term drug therapy. We have handouts that explain these problems and the types of behavior modification procedures used to work with them. If your pet exhibits these behaviors, contact your veterinarian for information about medication and for a referral to an animal behavior specialist.

Excessive Grooming

Dogs and cats will sometimes lick themselves excessively until skin sores form, or will pull patches of hair from their bodies. Treatment often involves a combination of drug therapy and behavior modification that can only be obtained through your veterinarian and an animal behavior specialist.

Finding Professional Help

When your pet's behavior problem is too complex, you should seek advice from a veterinarian and an animal behavior specialist. Knowing where to turn can be confusing. People who work with animal behavior problems are not regulated by any government agency and may have very different qualifications. Here are some tips that may help:

- **Veterinarian:** Your first call should be to your veterinarian. Urinary tract infections, hormone imbalances, neurological conditions, genetic abnormalities, orthopedic problems and dental disease are just a few examples of medical problems that can influence your pet's behavior. Once medical problems are ruled out, ask your veterinarian if he/she has specific training in animal behavior. If not, ask for a referral to an animal behavior specialist.
- **Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist:** In order to become a certified applied animal behaviorist, an individual must have specialized training in behavior problems in companion animals. The Animal Behavior Society (ABS) grants certification to behaviorists who are academically trained, have experience in the field and meet the ethical standards of the ABS. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) certifies veterinarians who pursue specialized coursework in animal behavior. People who have worked with or trained animals for many years are not animal behaviorists unless they have received specialized academic training.

- **Animal Trainer:** Some animal trainers are self-taught, and some may have apprenticed under another trainer and/or attended various training seminars. Animal trainers do not usually have specialized academic training in the study of animal behavior. Good animal trainers are knowledgeable about different training methods that focus primarily on reinforcing good behavior. They use punishment sparingly, appropriately, humanely or not at all. Inappropriate use of correction collars, including using choke collars to lift dogs off the ground are not appropriate or humane training methods and may cause injury to your dog.
 - Training classes are an excellent way to develop a good relationship with your pet by teaching him to respond reliably to specific cues. However, classes do not resolve problems such as house soiling, barking, aggression or separation anxiety. Specific behavior modification techniques must also be used. These may be best addressed by trainers who also offer behavior consulting services.
 - Ask the trainer what methods he uses and how he was trained. Go to a class, and if you're not comfortable, walk away. Dog obedience instructors can be certified by the National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors (NADOI) or the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT). Certification indicates that instructors have passed a test, had experience in dog training and been approved by their peers. If the trainer is endorsed by another organization, ask about the criteria for endorsement. Certification does not guarantee that a trainer uses humane methods of training. It is still up to you to determine if the methods are humane and appropriate for your dog.

Things to Watch for and Avoid

- **People who guarantee their work:** Qualified behaviorists and trainers will always do their best for you, but cannot guarantee outcomes, because animals have minds of their own and can never be completely controlled by humans.
- **People whose primary methods focus on punishment:** If their recommendations involve choking, hitting or slapping your pet, excessive confinement or isolation, this indicates little or no understanding of animal behavior.
- **People who misrepresent their qualifications:** People who call themselves animal behaviorists, even though they're not academically trained in animal behavior.
- **People who want to train your pet for you:** Most behavior problems are a result of interactions between the animal, the owner and the environment. Giving your pet to someone else to "fix" the problem is rarely successful because these three elements aren't addressed. Owners need to work with the animal in the home environment.

If you're willing to commit time, energy and resources to working with your pet and find qualified people to help you, the chances are good that you'll successfully resolve your pet's problem behaviors.