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TOP TEN BEHAVIORAL TIPS FOR DOGS

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INTRODUCTION

Complied below is a list of ten behavioral tips for consideration when working with canine behavioral problems. By keeping these tips in mind, you can enhance your behavioral skills and improve the quality of life for dogs and their owners.

BEHAVIORAL TIPS

Tip #1: Make a Diagnosis

Treating nonspecific clinical signs will sometimes work – think of the itchy dog that gets a dose of steroids and feels better the next day. But there is a good chance that the same dog is back in a month with the recurrence of the skin disorder because no one addressed the underlying flea allergy dermatitis. As a clinician, it is our duty to diagnose the condition that causes the clinical signs. This is no different with behavioral medicine: the goal should be to identify the underlying motivation behind the behavior. Is the dog urinating in the house secondary to cystitis, diabetes, separation anxiety, a noise phobia, submissive urination, excitement urination or another problem? The clinician should develop a preliminary differential list based on the presenting complaint. For clinicians new to behavioral medicine, it can be very helpful to do this prior to client consultation. This will allow the clinician to ask appropriate questions to rule in or rule out possible diagnosis. The clinician does have to keep an open mind, during a consultation as information or behaviors may be observed that point you in a different direction. Once the motivation for the behavior is determined, treatment can be targeted. One problem that the field of behavioral medicine suffers from is inconsistent terminology between colleagues. While the differences are large between countries, they are present even within the states. So instead of getting hung up on terminology, understand the dog's motivation, document it, and target treatment.

Tip #2: Stop and Smell the Roses

Dogs live in a different sensory world than that of a human. Their sense of smell is thousands of times more powerful than ours. Therefore, we must recognize that the input they receive is different than ours and keep an open mind as to how this affects their impressions and their treatment.

Although not technically a scent, pheromones are a form of chemical communication that affects behavior. Processed by the vomeronasal organ, they can be used to alter emotional states. DAP[®], Dog Appeasing Pheromone, is a commercially available synthetic pheromone, and mimics the natural pheromone released by the bitch from the intermammary area when she is nursing pups. It is purported to have a calming effect on the pups as they nurse. Placebo-controlled clinical studies on DAP[®] have been conducted on a variety of

anxiety-related states/conditions including separation anxiety, noise phobias, newly homed puppies and phobias during car travel. In all studies, the trend shows improved behavior when exposed to the DAP[®] pheromone, with some data reaching statistical significance. The drawbacks to its use are minimal, so it should be a consideration for treatment in anxiety-related conditions. With the recent launch of the product in a collar form (in addition to the diffuser and the spray), there are more administration options, making it more convenient for use in a variety of conditions.

Tip #3: An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

An animal's behavioral response to any given stimuli/situation is a function of both nature and nurture (genetics and learning). Therefore, the "best" dog would involve a combination of sound genetic material and raising the pup properly. There are no genetic screening tests for dog temperament. However, meeting the parents and related animals may provide some insight, albeit imprecise, into behavioral tendencies for that particular lineage. For most clients screening parental behavior is either not possible (parents not present) or abandoned as soon as they see cute little puppies, the fact that they can't meet the bitch because she is "a bit protective" or "a bit wild" is only remembered as they struggle with problems in their adolescent dog. Puppy temperament tests have long been purported to be predictors of adult temperament. However, to date, there have been no conclusive studies that support the predictive value of puppy temperament testing. In fact, all studies have refuted their predictive value. So, in most of our client puppy acquisition scenarios, there is no validated model to predict the genetic behavioral tendencies for that particular puppy and/or the window to actually do that has been lost, the puppy is already part of the family. If you do have clients that are proactive and seek your advice prior to selecting a puppy, advise them to ask the breeder for references from pups of previous litters (if they exist); ask for a meet and greet of the parents (without puppies present) and ask to see other related animals. If they like the temperament of those dogs, then have them meet the puppies. Until a temperament test is validated, the best recommendation for pup selection from a litter may be for them to pick the pup that doesn't stand out – a "middle of the road" puppy. Extremes in behavior are avoided. This goes against human nature, which tends to migrate to the extremes – the pup that is so outgoing/forward that s/he "picks" the owner by constantly jumping on them or the pup that is so frightened that the person feels compassion and wants to "rescue" the puppy.

This leaves the "nurture" portion of the equation as the most influential component. By nurturing the puppy properly, some problematic behaviors may be averted, even if they don't start with the best genetic predisposition. Socialization of puppies to future stimuli is best achieved during the sensitive socialization period: 3 to 16 weeks of age. Puppies should be exposed to a variety of stimuli in a positive manner, eg, without

eliciting fear/anxiety. One great resource to help owners implement proper socialization is the “The Ultimate Puppy Kit” from Premier Pet Products. This kit provides the owners with a lot of wonderful information on socialization as well as other important puppy issues such as basic obedience and house-training. In addition to the well-written booklets that describe the details in words and pictures, owners also get a pocket guide to carry with them as well as a poster to track socialization goals.

Tip #4: Punishment Is Hard to Do

While punishment is a validated behavioral modification technique (if you shock the rat every time it steps on a certain area of the cage, it will avoid that area); it only is effective if done properly. If applied improperly or for a condition for which it is not appropriate to treat, it can often increase behavioral problems. Punishment is not indicated for anxiety-based conditions; not only will the dog be anxious about its primary concern but will also be anxious about the impending punishment, making the entire situation worse. If it is considered an appropriate means of modifying the behavior in question, three main criteria must be met when using punishment: immediacy, consistency and efficacy.

Immediate: The delivery of the punishment must come during or immediately after the target behavior (maximum 1- to 2-second delay)

Consistent: The delivery of punishment must happen every time the target behavior occurs

Effective: The punishment must be strong enough to inhibit the unwanted behavior but not too harsh as to evoke anxiety or aggression

These are incredibly difficult criteria for most people to meet. Since most clients cannot abide by these criteria, punishment should not be a frequent part of treatments.

Tip #5: Haste Makes Waste

Making lasting behavioral changes takes time, especially if the problematic behavior has been established for a prolonged period. We live in a society where immediate gratification is commonplace and expected. Many behavioral modification programs utilize systematic desensitization and counterconditioning, a gradual process that is sabotaged when rushed. Counsel clients and make sure that they leave with realistic expectations.

Tip #6: Let a Sleeping Dog Lie

Many problems that we experience with dogs, including aggression, are due to anxiety. When the University of Georgia examined its canine behavioral diagnoses, there was a monumental shift from 1990 to 2000. In 1990, 70% of dogs that displayed aggression toward their owners were considered to be dominant; in 2000, 70% of dogs that displayed aggression towards their owners were diagnosed with fear-related aggression. Unpredictability, especially around valued resources (eg, food/resting spots) can result in

aggression. To reduce anxiety, dogs can benefit from a structured interaction system with their owners. A command/reward system for any interaction can strengthen relationships, impart discipline and reduce anxiety. The dog learns to look to the owner for cues about how to behave instead of being worried and reactive, a scenario that often results in aggression.

Tip #7: A Tired Dog Is a Good Dog

The benefits of exercise for the human body, mind and spirit are widely recognized. Exercise actually has a physiological impact, changing levels of neurochemicals in the brain. The same is probably true for dogs – exercise will help reduce stress, release beneficial hormones and make one less likely to go looking for trouble. While the amount and type of exercise may be tailored to the individual animal, daily walks should be prescribed as part of a wellness and/or rehabilitation program for most of our canine patients. Exceptions would exist for dogs that are too dangerous to walk or have medical problems that would be aggravated by exercise.

Tip #8: Give Directions

When watching owners interact with their dogs, especially when the dogs are engaging in a less than desirable behavior, you often see owners telling the dog what not to do “no...no...no..”. They often neglect to tell the dog what they want it to do. Giving the dog direction to do an appropriate alternative behavior is more important than repeatedly telling it “no.” For example, if a dog jumps up on someone, the best response would be to turn away and then as the dog falls back to earth as gravity takes hold, the dog is told to “sit”; compliance is rewarded with attention/praise.

Tip #9: Dose Drugs Correctly

One of the more common issues in behavioral referral practice is that dogs are put on subtherapeutic doses of psychotropic drugs for trial periods that are too short. Granted, for many psychotropic drugs definitive data is lacking on efficacious doses but anecdotal evidence for dose ranges is widely published. Most serotonin enhancing drugs require at least 4 weeks of treatment to evaluate efficacy.

Tip #10: Ignore the Bad, Reward the Good

If you only had one take-home message to share with your clients, it would be to ignore the bad behavior and reward the good behavior. Many nuisance behaviors are actually manipulative ways for the dog to gain owner attention. A good example is stealing socks and parading them in front of the owner before engaging in a game of chase/evasion. Implementing better household management (dirty socks placed in hamper) and ignoring the occasional acquisition of a stray sock may extinguish the behavior. Play with appropriate toys would be encouraged and rewarded. While safety issues always need to be considered (eg, if the pet ingested the socks, ignoring it would not be wise) many

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problematic/nuisance behaviors could be resolved with this simple mantra.

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