

Managing your pet's behavior

In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the behavior of pets. More than 90% of all dog owners complain about problems in this area. In fact, unwanted behavior of pets is the leading cause of healthy dogs and cats being put to sleep each year. As a result, veterinarians have developed a specialization in the field of animal behavior.

Most of the knowledge base in the field has developed over the past 15 years. Although dogs, cats and people have lived together for thousands of years, relatively little study had been done on their behavior. For instance, scientific journals contain hundreds of articles on the meanings of various sounds of songbirds, but almost nothing on the meaning of the barks and yips dogs use to communicate.

All in all, living with dogs and cats can frequently be as confusing as living with people! Fortunately, much progress has been made in the past few years in understanding how dogs and cats think and learn. Thus, we are able to deal with problem behaviors much more effectively, because we understand how these animal's minds process signals and information. Most problem behaviors are actually NORMAL behaviors that are simply unacceptable to the humans they live with. Redirecting and retraining can make our animal companions much better and happier pets.

Veterinarians and trainers are putting much more emphasis nowadays on early training - when your puppy or kitten is very young. As with children, there are certain ages at which the brain is developing in certain ways. We can take advantage of these windows of opportunity to shape our puppies' and kittens' behavior patterns to make them better pets for the rest of their lives. If you start your puppy or kitten off on the right foot he or she will be a better companion for the next 10 to 15 years. If started off wrong, there may be a lifetime of problems.

This is why cats that had no human contact as kittens can't be tamed, and why pet store puppies may be permanently impaired, just like abused or neglected children. If a pet does not form bonds with humans at the time his brain is ready to do so, he never will. Likewise, if your dog learns early that you will back down and let him be the leader in his household "pack", it is much harder to train him to be subordinate later on.

When you bring a new puppy or kitten to your vet, he or she will often spend a lot of time discussing behavior and the prevention of behavior problems. Please let your pet's doctor know if you are having any trouble with the behavior of your pets. We are getting better and better at resolving these problems, because there has been a lot of research lately on what does and doesn't work. There are also many excellent books and videos available on training, as well as behavior experts and trainers, to help you be successful in your training efforts. What works for one dog or cat may not work for another. The experience and expertise of those educated in the field of behavior is invaluable.