



BEHAVIOUR AND TRAINING

HOW TO PREVENT YOUR FURRY COMPANION FROM EATING YOUR SOFA, JUMPING ON STRANGERS, AND OTHER UNWANTED BEHAVIOURS

By DR. CYNTHIA SMILLIE

Problem behaviours in our beloved pets can often leave us perplexed, angry, highly stressed and even sometimes amused. After all, why would your pampered pooch want to launch himself like a jet-propelled rocket towards every dog on the other side of the street, yanking you off your feet in the process, or your terrier try to dig his way to Australia via your sofa? Why does your Border Collie suddenly start to herd the family up like sheep and nip at your ankles, or why does your cherished cat on whom you lavish attention, not to mention expensive tins of premium cat food, spray urine all over the shopping bags you have left at the front door, or worse still, refuse to use the litter tray in the kitchen, preferring the deep pile carpet in the living room? Expecting your neighbours to put up with your squawking parrot or constantly barking dog is also likely to be a problem and will put a strain on neighbourly relations.

Our companion animals can

exhibit these and a wide variety of other behaviour problems. Dogs jump up on us, they take over the bed, they destroy the kitchen when left alone and they bite the delivery man. Although cats are seen less often than dogs for problem behaviour this does not mean that cats do not exhibit a similar range of problems, including aggression, spraying or even chewing their

wrong place at the wrong time and are therefore unacceptable in the domestic environment. Owners need to understand why their pet behaves in a certain way and how to respond appropriately.

Some problem behaviours such as pulling on the lead or not coming back when called are simply the result of a lack of obedience and can be resolved

ANOTHER INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIOUR IS INDIVIDUAL TEMPERAMENT AND ANYONE WHO HAS A SISTER OR A BROTHER WILL KNOW ALL ABOUT THAT.

way through their owners' precious cashmere sweaters!

Why do dogs and cats behave as they do? The simple answer is because they ARE dogs and cats, that is not little people in fur coats. The majority of problems exhibited by dogs and cats are usually perfectly normal behaviours from the animals' point of view but become a problem for us because they occur in the

by good training using plenty of reward-based positive reinforcement. However, many behaviour problems such as aggression, fear, anxiety, phobias and compulsive disorders cannot be resolved by training alone, although training is always part of the solution. The difference between a trainer and a behaviourist is that a trainer tries to control behaviour whereas a behaviour-

SOME BREEDS HAVE PARTICULAR BEHAVIOUR TRAITS

ist finds out why an animal is behaving in a certain way and then uses behaviour modification to change the behaviour.

Whenever we consider a problem behaviour we must first establish the root cause. What is the motivation or in other words what is driving the behaviour? For example, many behaviour problems have fear or anxiety as an underlying emotional motivation or it may be frustration, emotional conflict or even lack of confidence through a lack of appropriate learning experiences. Any behavioural response by an animal is driven by its instinct to maintain or protect itself.

The choices an animal makes in response to its environment are influenced by a number of factors including genetics, breed, individual temperament and its learning experiences.

We know for example that in dogs, a fearful or anxious mother can pass this predisposition on to her puppies hence the recommendation that fearful or nervous bitches should not be allowed to breed. In cats the tendency for boldness and hence friendly behaviour is inherited from the father.

The subject of breed is a fascinating one and it is especially relevant to what choices a new owner should consider when acquiring a new pet. Certain breeds have been bred for generations to perform specific tasks and this behaviour is "hard wired"; however, when animals are kept in a domestic environment this can create problems. Consider the Border Collie that starts nipping at the children's heels in an attempt to round them up or chases cyclists or joggers. Border Collies are wonderful herding dogs and workaholics into the bargain. They love being busy. However, when we put them into a flat with little exercise and nothing to do all day then this instinct to herd may be



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directed towards inappropriate targets. But for the dog he is just behaving like the herding dog he is, in other words like a Border Collie. However, these dogs can be labelled as aggressive; whereas in most case it is just that the dog's behavioural needs are not being satisfied.

Another example of dogs behaving like dogs are the terrier breeds. These feisty little dogs were mostly bred to dig down into small dark holes to find and kill rats and rabbits. Where better do this in the absence of a burrow than your expensive sofa!

If we don't give the dog an outlet for this digging instinct it will be redirected towards something the dog thinks is perfectly normal but which to the owner is totally unacceptable and the dog is labelled as destructive or naughty. Trying to suppress this behaviour is counter productive, but it does need to be redirected. In Hong Kong, this is not always easy as not everyone has a garden. Providing a sand pit in your flat is not an option either, but maybe taking the terrier to the beach and playing digging games is and your terrier will love you for it.

Labradors are also very popular in Hong Kong and as owners of these dogs know, they love to come and greet you with a toy in their mouth. This is part of their in-built instinct to retrieve, but try as we might they will never be any good at herding sheep! And on the subject of wool it seems that it is the oriental breeds such as the Siamese that are more likely to end up eating your cardigan.

Another influence on behaviour is individual temperament and anyone who has a sister or a brother will know all about that. Within the same family, one sibling will be quiet and shy while another may be full of confidence despite the same parents

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and the same nurturing. It's the same with dogs and cats. Look at any litter of puppies or kittens and you can see the puppy that comes rushing to say hello while its sibling hangs back and is bowled over in the rush.

However, one of the most important factors in how behaviour will manifest is learning and the experiences, both positive and negative, that an animal has, not just as a puppy or kitten but throughout its life.

Particularly important is the process of socialisation whereby an animal learns to recognise and interact with its own species and the species with which it co-habits, namely us! The process is important because it prepares puppies and kittens for their lives in a domestic environment. The most sensitive period of behavioural development is from

4 to 14 weeks in puppies (but particularly from 4 to 8 weeks) and from 2 to 7 weeks in kittens. It is during these periods that the animal is most receptive to socialisation and it is important for puppies and kittens to be introduced to a wide variety of people, other animals and novel experiences at this time. However, this exposure is unfortunately often lacking in many puppies and kittens which spend their early months in pet shops or breeding establishments and these animals are more likely to suffer behavioural problems as a result.

As pet owners, we have very high expectations of the animals that share our lives and they reward us with their unconditional love and companionship. But in turn we owe it to them not only to provide them with food and

shelter but also to understand their normal behaviour, social structure and the way they communicate. Understanding these and providing good early socialisation can help prevent many behavioural problems and help us as owners to provide a better and more stimulating environment that best meets our pet's behavioural needs.

So, many factors contribute to the way our pets behave and the next time you think that your much-loved pet is misbehaving, consider that in fact it might just be misunderstood. 🐾

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