Behavior Problems: Helping Clients Help Their Pets

Nelle Wyatt, LVMT, CPDT-KA
University of Tennessee

Dogs and cats with behavior problems are difficult to treat, but a veterinary nurse knowledgeable in learning theory and reward-based behavior modification training techniques can be a veterinarian’s most valuable asset with these patients. Veterinary nurses, unlike trainers or noncertified behaviorists, must adhere to a state practice act that prohibits diagnosing and prescribing treatment for behavior conditions, so the veterinarian and veterinary nurse must work side-by-side when formulating management and treatment plans.
Once the veterinarian has diagnosed the patient's behavior problem and outlined a treatment plan, the veterinary nurse can help the owner implement the plan and may even adjust the training and management plan as long as the adjustments do not interfere with or alter the treatment plan. Modifications are sometimes necessary because patient temperaments, environments, and relationship dynamics with family members and other pets vary.

Treatment should be based on the family's understanding and potential for compliance. Clients need to understand what contributes to their pet's undesirable behavior, know how to observe the animal's body language, and identify subtle behavior changes indicating increased anxiety and arousal. (See Resources.) Clients must also be proficient with training tools and equipment to ensure the patient is kept safe and controlled humanely. One of the veterinary nurse's most crucial responsibilities is teaching clients how to use training tools proficiently, ideally by providing written instructions and instructional videos. Because the clients will be performing the daily behavior training at home, emphasize the importance of timing when using the techniques. A reward or punishment must be delivered immediately after a behavior to be effective; poor timing can result in accidentally reinforcing the inappropriate behavior or punishing the appropriate behavior.¹

**Designing a Plan Clients Can Follow**

A behavior modification plan includes several key components regardless of the diagnosis.

After the factors eliciting or contributing to the undesired behavior are identified (e.g., strangers, children, fireworks), avoid those factors unless strategically used as part of a behavior modification exercise. Also, consider the effect of the patient's undesired behavior on family members and other pets at home.

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**Common Behavior Problems**

Here are the most common behavior problems seen by the Animal Behavior Clinic at University of Tennessee:

- **Aggression:** Safety is the primary goal when formulating a management and treatment plan for these patients.
- **Separation Anxiety & Thunderstorm Phobia:** Treatment plans for these fears routinely require medication and should include keeping the patient safe and reducing destruction. Controlling the eliciting factors is difficult, and the team should work with the client to find a realistic solution.
- **House SOiling:** This can be the result of many factors (e.g., unlearned housetraining, litter box aversion, anxiety, underlying medical conditions). Some clients may believe their pet is being spiteful, and the veterinary team will need to help them change their opinions and understand the patient's motivations.

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**Resources**

Behavior problems can adversely affect the human–animal bond, and damaged relationships should be repaired to keep the family dedicated to treating the pet.1

Ensure clients are aware of possible adverse effects of any psychoactive medications prescribed for the patient. Few psychoactive medications are approved to treat behavioral disorders in veterinary patients,2 but those used successfully are routinely human generics and possible side effects are well-documented. Also, observe clients using the training tools and techniques to ensure proper use.

**Conclusion**
As with all difficult veterinary cases, treating patients with behavior problems is a team effort, but veterinary nurses can play a key role in training and supporting clients and ensuring compliance so both patient and client enjoy a better quality of life.

**References**

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**TEAM TAKEAWAYS:**

**Veterinarians:** After you have diagnosed the behavioral problem and outlined a treatment plan, hand over implementation to the veterinary nurse, allowing her to modify the plan according to the patient’s specific needs.

**Nursing Team:** One of the veterinary nurse’s most important responsibilities is teaching clients how to use training tools and techniques proficiently and humanely, so be sure instructional brochures and videos are available.

**Client Care Team:** Because clients whose pets have behavior problems often become overwhelmed and discouraged, be sure a team member provides regular support.

Visit [veterinaryteambrief.com](http://veterinaryteambrief.com) for a sample behavior modification plan for pet owners.