

Oh behave2! Solutions to problems – are we expected to solve everything?

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Abstract

With so many companion animal behavioural problems in our community, and an increasing knowledge of potential solutions, it can be tempting to try to fix everything. Whether this is possible, practical and preferable is debatable. The time investment may be too great. Owners may not want to follow our solutions. Some solutions may not work. Other people may be better qualified for the delivering the solutions.

The problem prevention and treatment possibilities that exist in our Australian marketplace and communities and their uses to people involved in urban animal management will be discussed. Ways in which we can all contribute and work together to find solutions will also be suggested.

Discussion

Working in the companion animal industry, we have realised, over the past decade, just how common animal behaviour problem are. As we learn more about pets and their problems, we also gain more knowledge about potential solutions for these unwanted situations. Solving companion animal behaviour problems is possible. Unfortunately it is not always easy.

Frustrations

While many of us know what needs to be done to solve problems, we are often frustrated by not being able to.

There are many reasons why this can happen:

- We give companion animal owners our suggestions of how to solve behaviour problems and they do not follow our advice.
- Solutions we may offer do not work.
- We are unsure of the many different types of advice and solutions available and/or which one/s would be most appropriate in particular situations.
- We do not have the experience to decide the appropriate course of action.
- Problems that seem simple on the surface often have many components and/or layers of complexity involved in their cause. The solution may have to address all of these.
- Behaviour takes time to change and often we do not have this time, within our work roles, to commit to solving problems.

Potential solutions

Table 1 (below) takes a common behavioural problem, roaming dogs, and examines the potential ways we may go about solving this unwanted behaviour. Many potential solutions are suggested and the positive and negatives associated with this solutions are discussed (you may be able to think of others). A likely outcome is given, as a suggestion, but this may vary depending on your individual community of pet owners.

Table 1: A common behaviour problem (roaming dog), potential solutions and their suitability (N.B. These are suggestions only)

Canine behaviour problem	Positives	Negatives	Likely outcome
Dog (18 month, desexed male) escapes and roams neighbourhood	According to owners, dog is over-excitabile and entertains himself while owners are out	Dog annoys family and neighbours	If nothing is done -no change or dog's behaviour gets worse; Owner fined
Potential solutions			
Offer help (verbal or practical advice) from you or your team	May cost little, keeps owners interested in your organisation	May be expensive (resource wise); May lack knowledge or skills to communicate	Owners listen, try some suggestions
Offer written material eg. leaflets, booklets	Many owners learn by reading; Can be referred to at a later date	May be expensive for the provider; Many owners do not read material	Some read and follow through, others don't
Vet check – medication?	May calm dog down	May be expensive, may not address the cause of the problem	Dog temporarily stops roaming
Training – local dog training club	Will give the dog stimulation and teach him some manners	Owners not willing; May not be available locally; May be too general in training	Dog learns some manners and is better behaved
In-home training – private trainers (individuals or franchise)	May be readily available, recommended by vets and friends	May be expensive; May not treat cause of problem; May not be able to endorse particular businesses	In some cases problem is solved, others no change
Behaviour specialist – suggest consult/s	Qualified professionals offering researched treatment; Addresses the true cause of the problem	May be expensive, may be time consuming	Problem is understood in most cases and, with owner commitment, dog is cured
Recommend products – toys, leashes to keep the dog entertained at home	Dog will get stimulation	May be expensive; May not be able to endorse products; May not solve problem	Dog is more occupied for some time
Other ideas			

Table 2 takes another behaviour problem and gives you the chance to determine your or your organisation's thoughts/stance on helping with this problem.

Working together

Often the best solution to any particular behaviour problem is working together with a network of people. Councils may use literature, training clubs and/or refer to specialists. Animal welfare organisations may use vets, specialists and offer advice directly.

In using others to help solve community problems, it is your responsibility to check that the advice given by others matches your or your organisation's beliefs and standards. A guideline for products and services can be a useful checklist (Righetti 2005).

Working together with a network of others within your area (or who can be brought in when required) can help tackle the problem from many sides and is often the quickest and easiest solution to behavioural problems in our community. Working together may be the only way that we all tackle companion animal problems with a successful outcome.

References

- Righetti, J. (2005). A Quick Fix? Solutions for Animal Behaviour Problems in Urban Animal Management. Urban Animal Management. Proceedings of the 15th National Urban Animal Management Conference. AVA Ltd.

Joanne Righetti

Dr Joanne Righetti is an animal behaviourist, educating the public and professionals in all aspects of the human-animal relationship. Her background is in zoology, with a PhD in animal behaviour and a counselling diploma – qualifications which enable her to work with all sorts of animals – including the human variety!

Joanne consults to a variety of organisations including non-profit organisations, commercial companies, councils and vet clinics. She also deals with pet problems one-on-one with the owners and is involved in a variety of media including radio, magazines and TV.

Joanne lives with a variety of animals including a Dalmatian, 4 cats, fish, 3 sons and a husband!

Table 2: A common behaviour problem (canine aggression towards people), potential solutions and their suitability

Canine behaviour problem	Positives	Negatives	Likely outcome
Aggression 3yr old entire male, has bitten family member and threatened neighbour	Family love dog and will put up with his teeth	Neighbours won't!	If nothing is done – someone may get bitten
Potential solutions			
Offer help (verbal or practical advice) from you or your team			
Offer written material eg. leaflets, booklets			
Vet check – medication? desexing?			
Training – local dog training club			
In-home training – private trainers (individuals or franchise)			
Behaviour specialist – suggest consult/s			
Recommend products – toys, leashes, muzzles			
Other ideas			