

Oh behave! Understanding the causes of companion animal behaviour problems in our community

J Righetti

Abstract

Companion animal behaviour problems, such as excessive barking, aggression, destructive behaviour, inappropriate roaming and defecation, are common in our communities and must be addressed by local government. In addition, animals surrendered to shelters, and even our own pets at home, commonly exhibit behavioural problems such as an abundance of energy, lack of training, toileting problems, anxiety and general mistrust or unfriendliness towards humans or other dogs.

The cause and development of behaviour problems will be explained, including the natural drives of the animal and the inappropriate behavioural habits that have formed. Basic causes of behavioural problems such as inadequate provision of animal's needs, lack of interaction and stimulation will be discussed. These will be presented in an easy to understand 'problem and cause check-list' that can be referenced by all those who work with companion animals.

Discussion

Companion animals frequently exhibit behaviour problems, ranging from minor irritations, such as jumping up, to those with potentially serious consequences to society, such as canine aggression. People working in the animal industry, including vets, shelter staff and council animal management officers, have to deal with the whole spectrum of problems exhibited by pets. The level of knowledge and the experience in understanding and solving companion animal problems is extremely varied within the animal industry. This paper is designed to give some basic knowledge to understand the reasons that animals exhibit behaviour problems.

Table 1: Common companion animal behaviour problems; cause and development

Behaviour Problem	Typical factors responsible for problem behaviours				Common Developmental period when behaviour emerges			Common causes of problem behaviour		
	Inherited behaviour		Learned behaviour		Juvenile	Maturity	Adult	Medical	Boredom	Anxiety
	Instinctive Drive	Genetic	by animal	human taught						
Barking (dogs)	Communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Roaming	Food, Mating		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
Destructiveness	Pack	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Aggression to people	Territorial/ Pack	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Aggression to dogs	Territorial/Pack	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Aggression to animals	Food	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	
Defecation - public	Communication			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
House soiling	Communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Spraying (cats)	Communication	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Phobias	Pack		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Over excitableness	Pack	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Jumping up	Pack		✓	✓	✓				✓	
Tail chasing	-		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Behaviour problems are a result of many individual factors including inherited and environmental components. These are tabled (Table 1) and discussed here:

Instinctively badly behaved?

Animals inherit behaviour tendencies and each species has its own drives. The most common drives across the animal kingdom are:

- survival, by having adequate food, water and shelter,
- mating, to pass on your genes.

Drives

Drives are instinctive, innate or inbuilt into that animal. It is extremely difficult to remove or change the drives of an animal. While some drives eg. finding food, are common across all species, other drives differ between species. Dogs, for instance, are naturally drawn to living in packs throughout their entire life, including eating, playing and sleeping. Cats, on the other hand, instinctively hunt alone, although they do tend to return to their feline group or human household for companionship.

We have bred our companion animals to perform a whole variety of behaviours and often these behaviours can be traced back to the animal's innate drives. We have taken the instinctive stalking behaviour of the wolf, for instance, and bred that into our herding breeds of dogs such as Collies and Kelpies. Likewise we have taken the ability to retrieve items of prey and bred that into our Retrievers. While, in modern society, we may not need the behaviours we have bred into our pets, these inbuilt drives still exist.

Individual characteristics

We also see differences, even within breeds, depending on the inherited characteristics of that particular mating. Certain behavioural traits of the parents and grandparents may be passed on to the offspring. This pattern of inheritance can explain differences between individual animals: why some Greyhounds run faster than others; why some Maltese like to cuddle up on their owner's lap and others are more independent.

Unfulfilled drives

Although, pampered within our homes, our animal companions have little need to worry about survival, the desire to satisfy instinctive drives remain high. Owners often fail to understand the importance of these drives. When drives cannot be fulfilled, for example when the needs of an animal are not being met, we often get undesirable behaviours exhibited.

Some examples in the human-controlled animal world might be:

- Breeds of dogs, which have historically been bred to work alongside humans, have little nowadays to occupy their mind and body so they make up their own stimulation eg. digging, chewing shoes, barking.
- Cats which are weaned too early may continue to suckle on their owners or ingest fabric.
- Dogs which are left alone may attempt to relocate their pack by roaming or barking.
- Resources that are considered precious, for example bones or the home territory, are worth guarding. We then see aggression directed towards potential threats.

Learning bad behaviour

The behaviour of an individual is, of course, not entirely the result of genetics and drives. If it were we would all behave exactly the same as our mothers and fathers! Behaviour is also greatly influenced by the environment that the animal is reared and spends its life within. From birth, and probably even before that, the experiences that an animal encounters make a difference to the way it learns to behave. Puppies may learn to eat quickly and guard their food from their litter mates. Kittens may learn how to stun, chase and ultimately kill a mouse.

Their learning occurs every moment of every day (not just at training classes as some owners mistakenly believe!). Just like humans, animals are more open to learning while young and their first experiences will have a huge impact on the rest of their life, although it is still possible for an old dog to learn new tricks. In many species, dogs and cats included, there is a sensitive period of learning, which normally takes place when the animal's senses have developed enough to be aware of a world outside of mother and milk. Kittens and puppies learn to play with their littermates, learn to eat (and, hopefully, what not to eat) and learn about the world around them. A scary experience at this stage of life can result in a lifelong dislike of that particular stimulus.

Socialisation

This process of introducing young animals to lots of varied encounters and experiences in a positive way is known as socialisation. Animals which are poorly socialised or which have negative experiences to a particular stimulus, will often have difficulty interacting when exposed to that stimulus again. The dog which was frightened by a tradesman wearing uniform and boots may fear tradesmen throughout his life. He may also generalise the experience to all people wearing boots, uniforms or even men in general.

If the feared object should be encountered again the dog may react by attempting to get away (common in dogs that are afraid of thunderstorms) or may warn the threat to back off using his teeth. We then have an aggressive dog.

Training

Humans can enhance an animal's lifelong learning by the process of training. In recent years puppy pre-schools, and even kitten kindies, have become common and can provide an opportunity for socialisation and to begin the journey towards a better behaved dog (with the owners learning just as much as their puppies). Many owners further their dog's learning by taking them to obedience schools. This can help towards creating a well-behaved dog in the home and in the wider community.

Many owners do not need the perfect heel or stay but need a dog with manners; one which knows it is impolite to jump up or sniff crotches. Much of behaviour therapy is designed to go back to basics and instruct the dog in basic manners or the chance to be re-socialised in a controlled manner.

Maturing

As an animal matures behaviours may start to be exhibited. Dogs and cats, especially if not desexed, may begin to roam. Dogs which had previously confined their toileting habits to their backyards now begin to lift their legs at every lamppost. Dogs that have been quiet until now, suddenly find their barking voice. This period, generally from 6 months to 2 years of age, becomes a trying time for owners. This is why we find so many 18-month old dogs looking for new homes in shelters.

Life within a household

Wild dogs live in hierarchically structured packs and, while there is some debate as to whether the human-dog relationship can be related directly to the natural dog pack, there is no doubt that some dogs are always pushing for authority within the household. A bit like human teenagers, they push the boundaries, demanding the best seat on the sofa or to be as close to the owner as possible at all times (even the end of the bed is unacceptable when a pillow is available!). When their desires are not fulfilled they fight for their rights and may be prepared to bite when the owner does not listen to the warning. Dogs that exhibit household aggression are not easy to live with.

Pets living within our homes exist in variety of conditions and interactive circumstances, of which there are two extremes:

- A life of living in the backyard with little stimulation, little variation and little contact with the human members of the family.
- A life of luxury including sitting on sofas, sleeping on their owner's beds, eating with their owners and generally having every desire and whim catered for – in designer style.

Both may result in problems. The majority of pets and their owners fall somewhere between the extremes; the latter, however, is becoming more common. The traditional Aussie working dog is gradually being replaced in our households with a much smaller (<10kg) companion dog.

No matter what relationships the owners foster with their animal companions, problems may arise. The dog which is shut outdoors will undoubtedly be bored and will often crave stimulation; barking, digging, escaping, and even attacking people or other dogs as he does not trust them. The pampered pooch may expect that level of attention in all his interactions and may demand it, even to the point of aggression towards people in his family and immediate community.

Animals that are uncertain of their position in the household or where there are unexpected or unwanted environmental changes may experience anxiety. Stressed out pets are now becoming as common as anxious humans.

Even simple behaviour problems can become annoying. Australian pet owners identify over-excitement and jumping up on people as being the most common dog behaviour problems experienced (Kobelt et al 2003).

Life in the community

Feline behaviour problems are more typically confined to the home and family members e.g. attacking ankles, spraying in corners. They can, more rarely than dogs, impact on the local community: attacking neighbourhood residents, pooing in children's sandpits or the howls and meows of fighting causing sleepless nights. It is one of the cat's instinctive drives that creates most annoyance in our Australian community – hunting. While hunting can be prevented by keeping our cats indoors, this may result in unwanted behaviours due to lack of stimulation, interaction or need fulfillment.

So, with innate drives remaining unfulfilled, unwanted behaviours learned within our households and a lack of understanding by pet owners, it is not surprising that our pet's behaviour should impact on local communities too. Roaming dogs may hound us. Barking dogs annoy everyone. We may fear a dog attack. Pets have become a problem.

Even those relatively well behaved dogs in our local parks are under pressure to behave better. Social competition amongst owners is now creating a network of owners who compete with one another. These days it may be for the trendiest collar or the designer poo bag but hopefully soon, it will also be for the best behaved pet.

N.B. Potential solution for unwanted companion animal behaviour problems will be addressed in a later paper.

References

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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!

Notes