

18

Pet problems solved: Interactive Q&A

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Pets can bring us great pleasure but certain behaviours of dogs, cats or their owners can be a source of great frustration for those who must deal with them. Problems such as excessive barking, aggression, fears, phobias and destructive behaviours are all common, yet annoying, behaviours. These can impact on our enjoyment of pets and our community's tolerance of pet owners.

This Interactive Q&A session will help you understand and deal with the unwanted behaviours of companion animals. The animal's drives and likely causes of the behaviours will be explained, together with suggestions of the most effective short-term management and long-term solutions to the problems.

Submit your questions and/or case studies prior to the session and Dr Jo will take you through the causes of and solutions to the cases described. No problem is too big, too small or too embarrassing to talk about so bring your most annoying cases, those you lose sleep over or those you are simply curious to understand.

Paper: Whatever you need to know, just ask!

Pets can bring us great pleasure but certain behaviours of dogs, cats or their owners can be a source of great frustration for those who must deal with them. A modern dog's life may bring many challenges to both dog and owner (McGreevy & Boakes, 2009; Bradshaw, 2011) and cats are not without their share of unwanted behaviours too. Problems such as excessive barking, aggression, fears, phobias and destructive behaviours are all common, yet annoying, pet behaviours. These can impact on our enjoyment of companion animals and our community's tolerance of pet owners.

Solutions to pet behaviour problems require an understanding of behaviour and successful implementation of short and long-term solutions.

Instinct and learning

Behaviours in animals arise from a combination of instinct and learning. Instinctive behaviours are a result of drives, innate within species. Drives in our pets include the need to find food, the need for shelter and the need to have companionship. Often

unwanted behaviours are a result of the animal trying to fulfil these needs.

Dogs, for instance, have an instinct or drive to hunt for food. This may lead them to chase birds, raid garbage bins or steal food from our tables. When they receive food from their actions, they are rewarded and learn that this strategy is productive. Drives, being inbuilt, cannot be removed without generations of breeding so we have to satisfy them, in appropriate ways.

Learning in animals involves a combination of processes, from simple *habituation* to repeated events (for example, your puppy no longer responding when the telephone rings), to *sensitisation* to anxiety-provoking events (for example, pacing during thunderstorms, leading to escaping and roaming the streets), to *trial and error* learning (for example, scratching at door, then barking to get owner's attention).

Our pets' behaviour is shaped by the owner's actions. Owners may provide opportunities for their pets to learn – attending puppy classes, for example, which encourages socialisation opportunities. Alternatively pet owners may be completely unaware of their impact on their pet's behaviour. Shouting at their dog for barking, for example, is often an attempt to reduce unwanted, noisy behaviour but may have the opposite effect of reinforcing it.

The manner in which people respond to unwanted pet behaviours will affect their outcome, as will how we teach our pets. Owner actions may vary from:

- positive, motivational encouragement of desired behaviour eg. praise or treats
- negative reinforcement, involving the removal of discomfort on performance of desired behaviour eg. head halters
- punishment, including either:
 - positive punishment eg. shouting or inflicting physical pain
 - negative punishment eg. withdrawal of treats or time out

Animals may be trained using a variety of methods but it helps to understand just how they learn (McGreevy, 2007).

