

Veterinary Guide to **Preventing Behavior Problems** in **Dogs** and **Cats**

Christine D. Calder
Sarah C. Wright



WILEY Blackwell

**Veterinary Guide to Preventing Behavior
Problems in Dogs and Cats**

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family, whose patience and understanding made this journey possible, enduring many dinners without my presence. To Roux, my patient companion, who provided silent support through countless late nights of writing, revising, and perfecting each chapter. A special dedication goes to Sarah, my co-author, whose invaluable contributions and unwavering dedication were crucial to bringing this project to fruition. Without her, the completion of this book would remain a question. My heartfelt thanks to each of you for your sacrifices, companionship, and invaluable support throughout this endeavor.

Christine D. Calder, DVM, DACVB

To my cat, Lucy Fur, a constant companion through vet school and beyond, the best educator in animal behavior I have known. To my dear friends, Jackie and Rebeca, for their unwavering support through countless French fries and endless ice cream. To Christine, for trusting me to join her in this project and for serving as a wonderful mentor in veterinary behavior. And last but certainly not least, to my family, for fostering my love of animals and encouraging me to pursue my passions. I am forever grateful.

Sarah C. Wright, DVM

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Foreword

In the early days of my veterinary career I encountered a challenge that would shape my professional journey in ways I could never have anticipated. Fresh out of veterinary school, armed with knowledge on treating medical diseases but with little understanding of the complexities of animal behavior, I faced cases that left me feeling helpless. In my first year of practice as a brand new veterinarian, there was a Shepherd named Miller. From performing his first vaccinations to his neutering I witnessed his growth, only to be faced with the harrowing decision to euthanize him at just 18 months old due to him biting his caregiver. This moment, etched in my memory, propelled me toward becoming a board-certified veterinary behaviorist.

The path was not easy. Recognizing and addressing behavior problems in pets go beyond the scope of many veterinary curriculums. Veterinarians often find themselves ill-equipped to guide pet owners through the complexities of their pets' behavioral needs, unable to offer preventative advice or understand the nuances of animal body language and species-specific behaviors.

This book is born out of a deep-seated desire to bridge that gap, to empower general practice veterinarians with the knowledge and skills needed to strengthen the human–animal bond and manage these cases in their own practice. It is a culmination of years of learning and understanding and, most importantly, a tribute to the countless pets like Miller, whose stories have been cut short by lack of education and knowledge of preventative strategies. My hope is that this guide serves as a comprehensive resource for practicing veterinarians, offering insights into the whys and hows of their patients' behaviors. By equipping practitioners with this knowledge, we can aspire to create a world where animals have a chance to remain in their homes, fostering a deeper understanding of behavior, and avoid euthanasia. Let this book be your guide to enhancing the lives of your patients and fostering the important bond they share with their caregivers.

Christine D. Calder, DVM, DACVB

Looking back, the COVID-19 pandemic was a blessing in disguise. As a direct result, I had the opportunity to become deeply involved with the Behavior Service at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. I eagerly participated in virtual journal club discussions and led telehealth cases of my own after weeks of careful observation and study with none other than Dr. Katherine Houpt, a founding member of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. I was also able to first connect with Christine, and I learned a vast amount from our work together. These experiences allowed me to fall in love with veterinary behavioral medicine.

I was truly lucky to have had the chance to learn so much about behavior while in school. Without those extracurriculars, my knowledge and skill set would be only a fraction of what they

are today, and they are very much still growing. In reflecting, I recognize areas for expansion in veterinary education, and I want to help realize that potential. This book is one step along the path to creating more widespread veterinary behavior resources. It is my hope that this text will inspire you to welcome the field of behavioral medicine into your practice, elevating the level of care that we provide as a profession.

Sarah C. Wright, DVM

Preface

Veterinary behavioral medicine is an emerging field that is rapidly gaining traction and recognition for its importance in promoting overall animal health and wellbeing. Behavior is not only a key indicator of pain and other disease states, often being the first thing that caregivers notice, it also substantially impacts an animal's quality of life and the human–animal bond. Indeed, behavior problems are some of the most common complaints presented to veterinary hospitals.

It is therefore the practitioner's responsibility to help clients prevent problematic behaviors from developing, as well as to promptly address those that arise, counseling clients to identify appropriate resources. Veterinary professionals are well positioned to help clients distinguish between training and emotional problems and to assist in selecting a suitable trainer when indicated. Client education also includes pre-adoption appointments, guidance on both general breed and individual animal selection, and information on setting up their new companions for success in a home environment. Through this, the human–animal bond is strengthened and preserved, decreasing the likelihood of relinquishment and euthanasia secondary to behavior problems.

Despite the acceptance of the vital nature of veterinary behavioral medicine, a significant number of veterinary colleges lack a robust behavioral education program, leaving the majority of graduates feeling underprepared to handle clients' concerns. Although it is imperative for veterinarians and other veterinary staff members to be equipped to address behavior questions and concerns, the profession as a whole does not yet possess the desired ability to serve as an authority in this field. Caregivers frequently turn to the internet, social media, and self-identified trainers as sources of information; however, these sources are often uncredible and unreliable, providing outdated or inaccurate information that may not only fail to help animals but also lead to worsened welfare states through exacerbated behavior problems.

In an effort to provide clinicians with resources to increase their knowledge in this field, this text delves into the world of veterinary behavioral medicine, with a focus on preventing problem behaviors from arising. To accomplish this, special attention is given to learning theory, animal body language, and normal puppy and kitten development. Furthermore, shelter animals and their unique needs are discussed; this is particularly important given the increase in popularity of shelter and rescue adoptions as sources of pets. Subsequent chapters address the veterinary clinic environment and ways to reduce the fear, anxiety, and stress associated with medical care.

As veterinarians grow their behavioral knowledge and skill set, they are better prepared to promote positive animal welfare, support the human–animal bond, and uphold the veterinary oath. Indeed, it is the veterinarian's lifelong obligation to continually improve, and veterinary behavioral medicine is an excellent area in which to fulfill that duty.

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I Thank you Wiley for your support and patience throughout the creation of this book. Started during a pandemic, this journey, spanning almost four years, was met with its fair share of challenges, author, and job changes along the way. It was the addition of Sarah as a co-author that truly jumpstarted the momentum needed to cross the finish line. Her dedication and insight have been welcomed. I am thankful for her partnership and unwavering support during this challenging project. Without Sarah, the completion of this book would have remained an uncertain goal. Her contribution has been invaluable, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Christine D. Calder, DVM, DACVB

A sincere thank you to the Wiley staff and to Christine for inviting me to collaborate in the production of this book. It has been a wonderful challenge, and I am indebted to you all for your constant patience, encouragement, and mentorship. This text would not have been possible without each and every one of you.

Sarah C. Wright, DVM

1

Animal Behavior: A Key Element in Veterinary Medicine

Understanding animal behavior is important for veterinary professionals, as it helps them recognize abnormal behaviors that may be associated with medical issues including pain, dermatological conditions, gastrointestinal disorders, metabolic diseases, and neurological problems (Camps et al. 2019; Frank 2014; Mills et al. 2020; Seibert and Landsberg 2008; Stelow 2020). Despite the prevalence of behavioral problems in animals, with 85% of dogs and 61% of cats exhibiting such problems, there is a notable gap in veterinary education regarding behavior (Dinwoodie et al. 2019; Sherman and Serpell 2008; Strickler and Shull 2014). Surveys reveal that less than 43% of veterinarians feel they received adequate training in veterinary behavior during their education (Kogan et al. 2020). This lack of preparation is reflected in the fact that the majority of veterinary graduates do not feel ready to handle behavior cases from their first day in practice (Calder et al. 2017).

The availability of specialized training in veterinary behavior is limited, with Calder et al. (2017) noting that less than 40% of veterinary schools employ a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (DACVB). Additionally, Shively et al. (2016) found that 27% of veterinary schools neither require nor offer an elective course in animal behavior. Even among schools that include behavior in their curriculum, 40% of students receive only four days or fewer of behavioral instruction (Calder et al. 2017).

This educational deficiency has considerable implications. Kogan et al. (2020) reported that over 99% of veterinarians encounter behavioral issues in their patients, even when behavior is not the primary concern. Additionally, there is a growing demand in the veterinary job market for graduates with knowledge of animal behavior, but client compliance with referrals to behavioral specialists is often limited by factors like cost and travel distance (Greenfield et al. 2004). This highlights the need for more accessible and comprehensive behavioral education within the general veterinary curriculum.

Some veterinarians may refer cases to various ways. Kogan et al. (2020) found that the majority handle most behavior cases themselves, with about 22% preferring to refer these cases to specialists. Surprisingly, a significant number of veterinarians do not routinely ask clients about behavioral issues, with only about 25% consistently inquiring about such problems (Kogan et al. 2020). Additionally, Patronek and Dodman (1999) found that 15% of veterinarians never inquire at all. Referring cases to trainers or nonveterinary behaviorists in other practices (Siracusa et al. 2017), as observed by Siracusa et al. (2017).

The importance of understanding animal behavior is further highlighted by the fact that over 78% of dogs show signs of fear, anxiety, and stress in veterinary settings, and about 38% of cat

caregivers find the thought of taking their cat to the veterinary hospital stressful (Döring et al. 2009; Volk et al. 2011). Thus, a comprehensive understanding of behavior is essential to manage and treat animals effectively, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of both staff and animals, as well as providing positive experiences for pets and their caregivers.

Proper behavior management is not only about safety but also about creating a positive and humane experience for the animals under care. Animals that are less stressed tend to respond better to treatment, leading to smoother and faster recoveries. This not only improves their interactions with caregivers but also enhances the overall veterinary care experience.

Behavior problems are a primary cause of euthanasia and surrendering of dogs and cats to shelters (Patronek and Dodman 1999; Salman et al. 2000; Scarlett et al. 2002; Seibert and Landsberg 2008). These problems strain the human–animal bond and can significantly impact the relationship between pets and their caregivers. Moreover, behavior problems can complicate a caregiver’s ability to follow medical advice, perform treatments, or administer medications at home.

Prevention of Behavior Problems

Early education is critical in preventing behavior issues in pets. It is essential for prospective pet caregivers to receive guidance that helps them select pets compatible with their lifestyle. This involves understanding the specific needs, temperaments, and care requirements of different breeds or types of pets. Educating caregivers about the importance of prenatal care helps them choose pets with suitable temperaments and prepare for their arrival, thereby reducing the likelihood of future behavioral issues.

Role of the General Practitioner

Veterinarians play a key role in identifying changes in animal behavior, which can often be indicators of underlying health problems. It is critical to learn how to differentiate between normal and abnormal behaviors, which requires consideration of the context, frequency, duration, severity, and sequence of these behaviors. A comprehensive patient evaluation is necessary for an accurate diagnosis, which may include referrals to specialists when complex behavior conditions are suspected.

In emergency scenarios involving acute behavior changes, veterinarians should provide immediate guidance. This includes triaging the situation and advising pet caregivers how to manage these situations, emphasizing the avoidance of punishment and consideration of temporary boarding solutions, if needed, to prevent harm and allow for more objective decision-making (Martin et al. 2014). For nonemergency cases, scheduling ample appointment time is important to thoroughly understand the client’s concerns (Martin et al. 2014). The initial step in managing these cases involves obtaining a detailed history of the pet’s behavior, including when it started, how it has progressed, and what attempts have been made to address the issue, along with the outcomes of these attempts (Martin et al. 2014).

In situations where behavior problems in pets escalate suddenly, leading to an emergency or crisis, the general practitioner should offer immediate assistance. While behavior issues usually develop over time, acute changes can occur, potentially reaching a “breaking point” for caregivers and resulting in an urgent situation. In these cases, the general practitioner’s role is to provide effective triage and assist caregivers in safely navigating the situation.

The practitioner should begin by validating the client's concerns and demonstrating empathy for their experience. Advise the client to avoid known triggers for the pet's behavior and all forms of punishment, both verbal and physical. In some instances temporary boarding might be beneficial, giving the client time to manage the situation more effectively and safely. Once the immediate safety of both the pet and the caregiver is assured, the practitioner should then facilitate a referral to a qualified behavior professional for specialized care and management. This approach ensures that caregivers receive the necessary support and guidance during critical behavior-related emergencies, helping to safely resolve the situation and pave the way for long-term behavioral management.

Common Behavior Problems

Behavior problems are common complaints in veterinary medicine that often indicate an underlying medical problem. These behavior changes are sometimes the first indication to caregivers that something is wrong with their pet. In determining whether a behavior problem has an underlying medical cause, a thorough differential diagnostic list and an in-depth medical workup is needed. A primary diagnosis of a behavioral condition is typically made by exclusion, meaning all potential medical differentials should be thoroughly assessed and eliminated before considering behavioral causes.

One of the most common complaints in both dogs and cats is aggression. Animals may exhibit aggression toward other animals, both familiar and unfamiliar, as well as toward people. It is important to note that aggression can be a normal behavior and does not always indicate an underlying medical or behavioral problem. However, because aggression is a nonspecific sign and can have various causes, the differential diagnosis list is extensive. Gathering a detailed history, including specifics of each aggressive incident, is important for appropriate management and treatment.

Fear, anxiety, and stress are commonly observed in veterinary patients. They occur both at the veterinary hospital and in environments away from the clinic. These problems can hinder access to medical care and often have significant impacts on the lives of both the animal and the client. The clinical signs associated with fear, anxiety, and stress can vary greatly between patients. Effective treatment and management depend on an accurate diagnosis. A complete workup and detailed history help ensure the diagnosis is specific and precise. Videos of the animal in their home environment and when alone are often invaluable and provide many additional details that the caregivers may be unable to offer.

House-soiling is another frequent complaint. This is more often brought up as a concern in cats, but it can occur in dogs as well. Again, a detailed history is highly valuable. This will help to distinguish toileting behavior from urine marking behavior and provides insights into the caregiver's management strategies. Are they appropriately providing for the animal's needs? Perhaps there is not an underlying medical or behavioral problem but rather an environmental issue that can be solved to alter the behavior.

Changes to a behavior pattern can occur at any age but are often noted with aging. Animals facing arthritis, pain, or cognitive decline can present with altered grooming, sleeping, eating, and vocalization behaviors, among others. Bloodwork, radiographs, urinalysis, and full neurologic and orthopedic examinations can provide critical insights into the underlying health of the patient and may reveal endocrine disease, urinary tract infections, seizure disorders, gastrointestinal disease, or musculoskeletal trauma; the differential diagnosis lists for underlying causes of these behavior pattern changes are extensive. Therefore, an exhaustive diagnostic screening panel is key to providing the proper treatment.

Behavior problems can manifest as new behaviors, loss of normal behaviors, or changes in the frequency of behaviors. Treating all underlying health problems is key to addressing medical components and may result in resolution of the behavioral signs. However, some cases are wholly or partially due to psychological causes; in these instances medical treatment alone will not be an effective treatment plan.

Conclusion

Understanding the common behavior complaints caregivers may mention and how to prevent them will help to build and protect the human–animal bond, thus maintaining a good quality of life for both the patient and the client.

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