

## **MAKE IT STOP!**

### **UNRULY BEHAVIORS – WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE AND HOW TO TREAT THEM**

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#### **What Might Stop You From Treating Unruly Behaviors and Why You Should Dive in Anyway**

Some dogs have serious behavioral problems that pose safety and welfare issues for their families. But even very common, easily corrected unruly behaviors (jumping up, pulling on leash, barking, etc.) can result in dissolution of the human-animal bond and lead to euthanasia or surrender.<sup>1</sup> A 1998 study by Dodman and Patronek estimated that approximately 224,000 behavioral euthanasias were performed yet many veterinarians didn't feel comfortable performing behavioral euthanasias. It also showed that many veterinarians don't ask about behavioral issues routinely and are uncomfortable handling them.<sup>2</sup>

This is not surprising because research indicates that most graduating veterinary students do not feel ready to manage veterinary behavior cases on "Day-1" of practice. Graduates who had courses that were 2 weeks or longer, taught by a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, and started in the first year of veterinary school felt better prepared.<sup>3</sup> But most veterinary schools do not have veterinary behaviorists, and many do not have veterinary behavior integrated into the curriculum.

An unruly behavior is a normal dog behavior that is not preferred by most human households. These behaviors are encouraged by misunderstandings about how animals learn and lack of exercise, consistent social interactions, and enrichment. Unskilled attempts at controlling unruly behaviors can leave owners frustrated and their dogs vulnerable to inappropriate use of punishment. Owners of pets with behavioral problems report feeling a lack of social support as well as care-giver burden.<sup>4</sup> As owners become more frustrated, the risk that the dog will be surrendered, re-homed, euthanized, neglected, or abused increases. Unruly behaviors are a common source of discontent amongst owners, but they can also be a great opportunity to help bond a client to your practice and improve the quality of life for your patients.

#### **What Behaviors Are Not Unruly?**

Behaviors that are due to a significant lack of impulse control, involve true threats (barking, lunging, growling, snarling, snapping, and biting that are not part of obvious play) or underlying anxieties, fears, or phobias are not unruly. While clinical signs may be similar, the underlying motivation is more complex than normal dog behavior exacerbated by inappropriate training techniques, lack of exercise, and/or a paucity of enrichment.

Whenever a client discusses a behavior issue with a veterinarian, it is important to first find out if the behavior is dangerous to the dog or others. Additional issues to be assessed include: possible medical etiologies and comorbidities, the underlying motivation and the dog's body language; whether the behavior is a normal dog behavior; what training techniques have been used to improve the behavior; the owner's understanding of normal dog behavior and training; and the owner's expectations and ability to implement a training plan. Behaviors that pose a threat to human or animal welfare, such as aggression or other anxiety disorders, should be referred to a veterinary behaviorist as soon as possible. Unruly patients should be referred to a thoroughly vetted, positive-reinforcement trainer for additional hands-on coaching. Give specific names of professionals or companies when referring or your client may end up with a trainer using inappropriate methodology.

#### **Basic Building Blocks for Correcting Unruly Behaviors**

Most unruly behaviors will improve with basic management including adequate exercise, enrichment, and consistent social interactions. Telling an animal what to do, instead of what not to do, is generally clearer and more successful for both animals and owners. Positive reinforcement training of cues such as sit, down, go to bed, and touch are excellent basics. Ideal levels of exercise vary based on each patient's medical history and signalment. In general, young, healthy dogs should have at least 1-2 hours of aerobic exercise daily. Supervised access to the outdoors should be part of the exercise plan to maximize the dog's opportunities to perform species-specific exploratory behaviors. Sniffing, an important behavior for dogs, should be encouraged or at the very least, not discouraged. Unfortunately, TV trainers have discouraged client from allowing dogs to sniff on walks. Enrichment activities that involve providing all meals in puzzle toys, setting up puzzle-solving games, and trick or agility training help dogs use their natural exploratory behavior and fill their time budgets with healthy, acceptable activities. It is important that owners start with easy activities so that the dogs do not get too frustrated to engage. Then they can continue to target games to the skill level of their dogs, gradually increasing the level of difficulty. Consistent social interactions are created using a program in which attention is given to the dog only when the dog is doing something

owner prefers. The dog performs a behavior (usually sit) on the owner's verbal/body language cue before the owner delivers a reinforcer (play, attention, petting, food, access to other places, leash attachment, etc.). Behaviors the owner doesn't want to reinforce are completely ignored and the environment is set up to decrease their occurrence. Punishment is limited to removal of anything that might reinforce the behaviors. Problem behaviors are redirected before they have the opportunity to intensify.

### **How Dogs Learn**

Dogs learn according to the same rules as other species. The most frequently recommended learning schemes use negative punishment, positive reinforcement, and negative reinforcement. Positive punishment is rarely considered a reasonable or ethical first-line treatment for behavioral problems. Negative punishment is the removal of something the dog wants to decrease the likelihood the target behavior will occur in the future. For example, an owner turns away or leaves the room when a dog jumps up to decrease future jumping up. Positive reinforcement is the addition of something the dog wants to increase the likelihood the target behavior will occur in the future. For example, if an owner notices their dog is resting quietly during dinnertime, they may toss a small piece of food to the dog in order to increase the likelihood that that the resting behavior will occur during future dinners. Negative reinforcement is the removal of something the dog finds aversive as soon as the target behavior occurs. This removal increases the likelihood that the target behavior will occur in the future. For instance, a properly handled head halter will apply pressure over the nose when the dog is pulling. This pressure over the nose will immediately release when the leash is loose, thereby increasing the likelihood of loose-leash walking in the future. Positive punishment is the application of an aversive stimulus (yelling, pinching, hitting, applying pressure to prong/choke or other collars, electric/"stim"/shock collars, jerking the leash, etc.) to decrease the likelihood that the targeted behavior will occur in the future. For instance, if a dog jumps up to greet, the owner might pinch the dog's toes when the dog jumps up. Positive punishment is not recommended because it can cause additional anxiety-related behaviors and cause or maintain aggressive behaviors.

### **Common Unruly Behaviors**

#### *Attention-Seeking Behaviors*

Many so-called "unruly" behaviors are really attention-seeking behaviors (pawing, licking, barking, nudging, mounting, destructiveness in the owner's presence, etc.). They often develop from normal dog behaviors when people accidentally reinforce them, usually intermittently. Intermittent reinforcement makes these behaviors quite resistant to extinction over time. Attention-seeking behaviors are almost always treated by removing attention immediately and consistently every time the dog performs the behavior (for instance, leaving the room if the dog steals an item, leaving the room if the dog jumps up, etc.). In addition, the owner is encouraged to proactively pay attention to the dog when it is performing acceptable activities (resting, playing with dog toys, greeting with all four feet on the floor, etc.).

#### *Mounting*

Mounting behaviors can be part of normal play. Other causes for mounting include attention-seeking, social uncertainty, and sexual motivations. Mounting can be a displacement behavior in some dogs. Treatment includes assessing whether the behavior is problematic or not (for instance, some mounting between dogs is normal and may not be a problem). Use of a previously learned cue (such as touch or coming when called) to move the dog away from situations that often stimulate mounting can be extremely helpful. Controlled behavior modification sessions can also lead to improvements. For instance, a dog that mounts visitors could be taught to play fetch or "find it" (a game where tiny treats are tossed behind the dog so the dog is reinforced for moving away from the visitor and for sniffing the ground). Attention-seeking mounting can be decreased by completely ignoring the dog or moving behind a barrier away from the dog and making sure to reward at least 10 appropriate behaviors each hour. Sexual motivations for mounting can be improved by neutering in many cases.

#### *Jumping Up*

Jumping up is a normal behavior in dogs, especially during greetings. It is encouraged by normal human behaviors such as patting the chest and petting the dog when they jump up. Since many dogs actively want to investigate or lick faces of other dogs and humans, they may jump up to do so unless people lean down. Many people inappropriately use punishment while intermittently and accidentally rewarding this behavior. For instance, a person may knee a dog in the chest when they jump up and the person is wearing work clothes but encourage the dog to jump up at other times. Jumping up is often successfully treated simply by turning away from the dog or leaving the room when they jump up and turning around/returning and paying attention to the dog as soon as all four

feet are on the floor. More structured training can also be helpful (such as teaching the dog to sit for all interactions including greetings).

### *Pulling on Leash*

Teaching a dog to walk on a loose leash is challenging for most families. It requires a significant amount of patience and impulse control for both the dog and the walker. It is important that handlers remember that, in general, dogs walk much faster than people. Walking at a human pace can be quite frustrating and unnatural for them. Like any unnatural behavior pattern, walking on a loose leash takes more time to learn and requires a higher rate of reinforcement than easier, more natural dog behaviors.

Many devices are purported to be useful for stopping pulling. While a skilled or very patient handler can teach a dog to walk on a loose leash with a regular leash and buckle collar, most people reach for some type of walking tool designed to improve control. Choke, prong, and electronic shock collars are almost uniformly inappropriate for this type of work, since the pain they cause can make dogs fearful. Head halters, front-attaching body harnesses, and body harnesses that tighten somewhat around the barrel of the chest can all be helpful aids while working on loose leash walking. There are multiple methods for teaching loose leash walking. In general, they focus on various ways to reinforce walking beside the owner (such as high-frequency, small treats given beside the owner's leg or clicking and treating every time the dog is within the range that the handler finds acceptable). When the dog pulls, many methods encourage the handler to stop the walk completely or turn in the opposite direction until the dog comes back to the handler. Setting a dog up for success by exercising them adequately in a fenced yard or inside and practicing training cues for a few minutes before walks will improve success.

### *Mouthing*

Mouthing is a common behavior of puppies that can extend into adulthood if the owner does not respond appropriately to it. Many different methods of discouraging mouthing behavior are reasonable, and some can be used in combination. A common method for teaching dogs not to mouth people or to attenuate their bite pressure is to end all games consistently when mouthing of a person occurs. One way to achieve this is to keep the dog in a confinement zone even during play (such as one room or an exercise pen). If the dog mouths, the person immediately gets up and leaves the dog for at least several seconds (or until the dog is doing a behavior that the owner wants to reward by returning). Some people may benefit from using taste aversion substances on their hands or clothes as they initiate this work, especially if the dog is large or bites are painful. Used alone, taste aversion substances are unlikely to solve the problem in very mouthy dogs. Dogs that are very mouthy can also benefit from being taught to carry items in their mouth during times when mouthing is a problem. Creating other targets for mouthing behavior can be helpful (for instance, controlled tug games). Muzzles can be utilized when trained appropriately for injurious, intractable, or unpredictable situations.

### *Destructive Behavior*

Destructive behavior is often a consequence of normal exploratory behavior, especially in juvenile and adolescent dogs. This behavior can be attenuated by providing adequate stimulation in the form of rotating food-dispensing puzzles and other toys/games in combination with trained confinement and appropriate exercise. Destruction of toys is a normal part of dog behavior. Destruction of stolen items can occur merely due to their novelty. Targeting of stolen items can be a learned behavior in some dogs; an intelligent dog quickly discovers that grabbing eyeglasses off the coffee table increases owner interaction much more quickly than playing with that same old rope toy.

### *Vocalizing When Confined*

It isn't natural for dogs to be confined for long periods. In general, teaching a dog to be crated should be a gradual process during which the dog learns that very special things happen in the crate, the crate is safe, and that vocalizing, scratching, and so on are ineffective at getting the dog out of the crate. Beginning crate training often starts with teaching the dog to go into and out of the crate on cue. Gradually the door can be closed behind the dog for longer and longer periods with the owner either leaving a long-lasting food-dispensing toy inside the crate or making a commitment to reinforcing the dog by hand or remotely intermittently while the dog is in the crate. The goal is that the dog is only in the crate at times and for durations where they can be comfortable and calm.

### *Excessive Barking*

In general, barking is a normal behavior that is frequently accidentally reinforced by humans. There are many motivations for barking including attention-seeking, play-related, fear/threat-aversion, behavioral arousal, cognitive problems, distress or anxiety, etc. Excessive barking must be treated on a case-by-case basis, taking potential motivations into account. In general, attention-seeking barking should never be rewarded. Instead, the owner

should focus on paying attention to the dog when they are quiet. For instance, a family whose dog barks for food while they are eating could use a combination of confinement and rewards for quiet behaviors (tossing treats, using an automatic food dispenser, or providing the dog with a long lasting food-dispensing toy).

### **Conclusion**

Unruly behaviors are common and distressing for families. But they are often successfully treated, especially early in their onset. Treatment includes meeting the animal's species-specific needs for enrichment, exercise, and social consistency. Appropriate application of reinforcers for preferred behaviors should happen multiple times per day, and removal of reinforcers for unruly behaviors should be swift. Punishment should be avoided. Remember, many families do not truly understand training or dog behavior even if they have had dogs before. Refer by name to positive reinforcement trainers or veterinary behaviorists for the best outcomes if you are uncertain about how to treat a problem or do not have time to fully support the family. When you do this, your clients will have happier relationships with their dogs, be thrilled with your support, and be more bonded to your practice.

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