politepetsmonth®

THE TRUTH ABOUT CATS AND DOGS – COMMON BEHAVIOURAL QUESTIONS ASKED AT THE VET

It is not uncommon for pet owners to experience behavioural issues with their pet. However, many aren't aware that their veterinarian can help.

Much of your pet's behaviour exists because its previous experiences have taught it that in this situation this is the best way for it to behave.

Your vet can help by giving you the skills to teach your pet another way to behave that is more worthwhile than their current behaviour.

As with most things, early intervention is the key, so consulting your vet about a behavioural issue straight away will make things much simpler and easier for you and your pet.

HOW TO DEAL WITH YOUR DOG

Many owners have questions about their dog's behaviour. Below is some general advice about how to handle some of the common behavioural problems in dogs, including barking, aggression, boisterous behaviour, destructive behaviour and toilet training.

Barking – barking is a normal way that dogs communicate with others. Dogs bark to get attention, during play, hunting, herding, territorial defence, threatening displays and fearful and anxious situations.

Understanding why your dog is barking is essential to controlling problem-barking, which is the most common complaint we hear from dog owners. Your vet can help you identify the reason your dog is barking and provide advice about how to control it.

Aggression – many clients ask how to control aggressive behaviour in their dog. It's important to remember that aggression is a normal behaviour expressed by dogs in a wide variety of situations.

All questions about aggressive behaviour need to be dealt with professionally by a veterinarian so that a full work-up can be performed. If the dog is deemed to be abnormally aggressive then a detailed and comprehensive management and treatment plan will be required.

Boisterous behaviour – this is often a sign of ineffective training, but it can occasionally be due to a neurochemical abnormality. To determine the best treatment for your dog, you should consult your veterinarian so that they can perform a comprehensive behavioural work-up.

Destructive behaviour – dogs do not destroy things vindictively, but there are many other reasons your dog may be destructive including, boredom, inadequate exercise, investigation of environment, anxiety, fear or phobia.

You vet can often help to resolve this type of behaviour relatively easily, however if the problem is more serious your dog may require a program of environmental management, behavioural management and possibly medication.

Toilet training – issues with toilet training in dogs can be caused by simple things like ineffective and or inconsistent training, but it can also have its roots in a behavioural problem like anxiety, fear or phobia, or a medical issue, such as cystitis, renal disease or parasitism. Visit your vet so that they can give your dog a comprehensive medical and behavioural work-up before the toilet training is instigated.

HOW TO CO-EXIST WITH YOUR CAT

In co-existing with us, cats can sometimes develop behaviours that may cause problems for their owners. The most common problems we see in cats include spraying or eliminating on furniture and carpets, scratching indoors, hunting, hiding and yowling.

Spraying – this is one of the most common behavioural problems that owners report in their cats. As with most of the feline elimination issues, it is a message, not a mistake, when a cat sprays – especially around doors and windows – or eliminates on the carpet.

For some cats, the issue is only that their assigned litter tray is unsuitable or not clean enough. Learning about how cats can develop preferences and aversions for the litter in the tray and the location of the tray is a useful first step. Kittens from three weeks of age start to look for a litter tray to use, and they are highly motivated to eliminate in sand-like substrates, but the preferred site and substrate varies from cat to cat.

Cats that exhibit this behaviour often have an issue that involves environmental stress,anxiety or fear, which will need to be diagnosed and managed by your veterinarian.

Scratching – scratching surfaces is normal cat behaviour that is used to communicate or mark territory. It is something they must do and it can be easier to direct their scratching towards an acceptable surface, especially in the early stages, rather than trying to stop the damage later.

Clicker training is fun, and a very effective way of training cats to use scratching posts and redirecting their energy into fun activities. Ask your vet about what will make a good scratching post for your feline friend.

Hunting – hunting or predatory behaviour is a completely normal behaviour for cats. There is really only one way to prevent predatory behaviour and that is to keep your cat confined to a cat enclosure so that it cannot catch the local wildlife. From early kittenhood, your feline friend is programmed to hunt. You can redirect that energy into toys, games and play or get another kitten to keep your feline friend company – this is an especially enriching option for city cats.

The good news is that there are many things that can be done with kittens to minimise the likelihood of the cat becoming a predator, but once the behaviour is expressed it is extremely difficult to stop, so early intervention is vital.

Hiding – many cat-owning clients are concerned about their cats being shy or scared. A certain level of shyness around strangers is normal, as cats are a vulnerable size, so they should be allowed to take refuge in a safe haven. Once they feel they can be safe when they sleep, most cats will spend extra time with their owners. However, if the intensity seems to be more than average you should take your cat for a visit to the vet to assess it further, as hiding is often the first sign of illness.

Yowling – owners can find that this is a common problem, particularly early in the morning. Often, crying at night starts because the cat is hungry, in pain, seeking attention, demanding food or defending its territory. Once established, it is necessary to determine exactly why the behaviour is occurring, and then manage the environment and teach the cat a better way to interact – and of course this is where your veterinarian can help.

The first step in addressing any concern you have with your cat or dog is to take them to your vet to check if there is an underlying medical condition that could be causing the problem. Once this has been determined you can begin to look at understanding the motivation for their problem and determine the best treatment for your four-legged family member.

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