

## What Is Animal Behaviour?

Most of us are familiar with the term, but what does “animal behaviour” actually mean, what influences it, and why is it important? Put simply, animal behaviour refers to the ways animals interact with, and respond to their environments. Our understanding of it is important in order for us to appropriately care for animals, whether they’re domesticated or not, and it provides a basis for animal training and better understanding of how we should interact with them. The better we understand animal behaviour, the greater the opportunity for us to live together happily and harmoniously.

### Can we compare animals’ behaviour to our own?

We too are part of the animal kingdom; We’re a species of highly intelligent primates, and we share some behavioural characteristics with animals. In fact, the study of animal behaviour can create insight into some of our own behaviours. We should not, however, assume too much similarity, as animal choices are less influenced by reasoning than ours.

### What triggers behaviour?

Behaviour occurs as a response to a stimulus; It can be something that is observable or not, and whilst it is assumed that most behaviour is ultimately aimed at increasing the chances of survival, animals, like us, can sometimes behave out of boredom, habit, or even behave self-destructively. Key to understanding behaviour is understanding how it is motivated.

The three influences on an animal's behaviour in any given situation are:

1. Genetics
2. Experience
3. Environment



In exploring human behaviour, we often ask whether something is driven by “nature or nurture”, or in other words, genetics or experience and environment, and science is continually trying to refine the answer to this. Twin studies are an example of the tools scientists use to increase understanding of the influence of genetics and experience on human behaviour.

**Genetics** – Of paramount importance in animal behaviour is genetics, which is often referred to as an animal’s instinctive behaviour. Most animals are programmed to behave in a particular way due to their genetic characteristics.



**Experience** – Another key influencer of behaviour is experience and this includes behaviours learned from interacting with an animal's environment and the people and other animals in it. Some behaviour will occur as a result of how an animal thinks or feels about an experience, however this is difficult to identify. Like ours, animals' perceptions aren't always an accurate assessment of what is actually occurring.

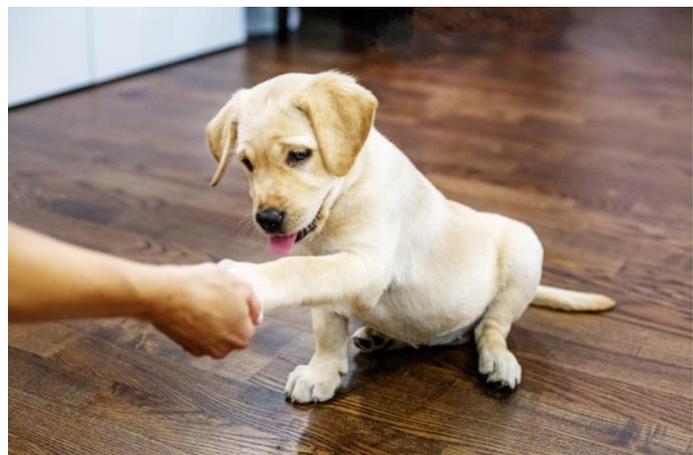
**Environment** – The environment will also have an influence on how an animal behaves at any given time. Its internal environment such as hunger, thirst, pain, tiredness, health etc, will influence behaviour as will external influences such as sounds, sights, heat or other stimuli.

No behaviour in animals can be characterised as either completely instinctive or completely learned; Both play a role. The degree by which genetics versus experience and environment is influencing behaviour, will influence our ability to modify it.

### **Can we modify animals' behaviour?**

We want our pets to be happy and healthy, and prerequisite to that is their comfort in the environment we create for them. To achieve this, there are times when modification of an animal's behaviour is necessary in order to alleviate an anxious, aggressive, or fearful response.

Animal behaviour vets study the way animals behave, try to determine what causes certain types of behaviour, and identify what is necessary for a change in behaviour. One of their roles is therefore to problem-solve.



### **Why use a behaviour veterinarian?**

Problem behaviour in pets is something that requires investigation and assessment and behaviour vets have many tools available to them. Training animals to do basic behaviours is not necessarily difficult, but professionals specially trained in how animals learn are likely to be more successful.

Behavioural problems can be complicated, particularly when the behaviour is motivated by several factors. A scientific background is therefore extremely important in being able to identify the source of the problem, test assumptions, and remain free from bias, in order to give pets their best chance at better behaviour without compromising welfare.



### **Need help with your pet's behaviour?**

Our behaviour team is led by senior veterinarian Dr Lisa Henshaw who is a member of The Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists in Veterinary Behaviour. Lisa is also a member of the Australian Veterinary Behaviour Interest Group and conducts veterinary behaviour consultations here at the hospital.

If you have a pet with chronic behaviour problems such as aggression, phobias, destructive behaviour, toileting, or vocalisation problems, then the chances are that you are both suffering. Talk to us about how Lisa and her team can help.