

**WORST BEHAVIOR**

Because behavior issues can negatively impact the human-animal bond, it's important to discuss and address them as early as possible.

**MEET THE AUTHOR**

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Empowering Clients to Address Behavior Concerns

There are some conversations that veterinary professionals dread. Discussing weight issues, presence of a terminal disease, or suspicion of medication abuse can leave you with a feeling of unrest. It is natural. These are not easy conversations to have, but we have them for the greater good. Behavior conversations with clients are no different.

Melissa is passionate about and deeply involved in the community of veterinary behavior and training. She has worked in both general medicine and behavioral specialty medicine. Her focus now remains in the nonprofit arena where she can combine the knowledge that she has gained from her bachelor's degree in health services administration and her certifications as a VTS in behavior and a Fear Free professional. Melissa enjoys sharing her knowledge with fellow veterinary professionals and training pet parents through presenting at conferences, teaching veterinary hospital staff, or working one on one.

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In fact, for some these are even more difficult. I have heard some veterinary professionals remark that they do not feel educated enough about behavior to speak to clients about it. Others say that previous discussions ended poorly, or clients became combative and defensive. Regardless, we must focus on the greater good that results from these conversations.

When we are referring to behavior, what is the greater good? Our focus goals should include making behavioral and training recommendations that reinforce the human-animal bond and keep family pets safe from harm while improving those problems, preventing unnecessary euthanasia or relinquishment, and offering a variety of treatment options that ultimately educate and empower the client.

Surrender and euthanasia for behavior-related problems is a major issue. Millions of dogs and cats enter shelters each year, approximately 1.5 million of which are euthanized.¹ Euthanasia or relinquishment may not always be avoidable. There may be times that this determination is made because it is the most safe, humane, and thought-out option. But proper education could play a role in eliminating unwanted, avoidable outcomes.

We want to be able to support clients on their journey to have a well-behaved pet that is valuable to them and with whom they enjoy spending time. It may sound like a tall order for some patients, but everything takes learning and practice.

Behavioral recommendations come in all shapes, sizes, and formats. Some recommendations may be indirect. Look around your practice; do you have literature displayed for local trainers, obedience schools, and doggy day care facilities? Do you have a community bulletin board hanging in the lobby advertising puppies or kittens for sale and neighborhood pet sitters? Though you may not realize it, your clinic is indirectly endorsing each individual posting.

Understandably, you want to make this information available to your clients because these are common topics of inquiry. But with some slight modifications to how we give these recommendations, we can offer them more knowledgeable information. On your community bulletin board, you can post multiple options. A more passive approach could include educational handouts and reference material to support the client on their quest. You could also ask the question, “Looking for a

new puppy or kitten? Talk to our staff about scheduling a pet selection assistance appointment.”

START ON THE RIGHT FOOT

Pet selection appointments are a way to bring revenue into the practice. They can also proactively set a pet parent up for success when looking to add to their family. This is our opportunity to help prevent euthanasia and relinquishment by assisting the family in making good choices from the very beginning. Veterinary nurses or other qualified team members can sit down and discuss topics such as breeds, best ages to obtain a pet, and the benefits and drawbacks of rescues, shelters, and breeders. If there was ever something that you thought would be beneficial to know before getting a pet, this is your opportunity to discuss it.

If a pet selection consultation is not possible because a new puppy has already been obtained, veterinary nurses can still play a vital role in giving valuable information to pet parents at a sensitive time in the pet's life. Offering education, training, and exposure-based sessions to young puppies is a great way to help prevent behavior problems before they start. The goal is to focus your efforts during early developmental stages to help puppies mature into socially appropriate, well-behaved, and confident adult dogs.²

FIND TRUSTED RESOURCES

Unfortunately, behavior problems may not be caught before they start, and clients will need our help to remedy them. Behavior is ubiquitous in veterinary medicine—no matter if you work in a general practice, a cardiology-exclusive practice, or a busy emergency room, behavior is truly a part of everything we do.

During an appointment you may witness unwanted behavior as you care for your patient, pet owners may casually mention struggles with unwanted behaviors, or they may seek your advice more directly. Regardless, this is your opportunity to get to them first. Pet owners are seeking information; they may want reassurance that they are making the right choice or they may be seeking guidance in the best direction for support. The best way to handle these situations is to be prepared.

A simple way to provide clients valuable information is to offer educational handouts, but it's important that you verify the source and author of any materials available. This may be a good time to discuss behavior



and training credentials. Not all trainers and behaviorists are the same. Behavior professionals can include veterinarians, veterinary nurses specialized in behavior, board-certified veterinary behaviorists, or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist. Dog trainers can be a good resource as well, but it is important to be mindful that there are no licensing or experience requirements to be a trainer, meaning that there may be no oversight of trainers or assurances that they are following a standard of care with each individual animal. In addition, there is no experience or licensing requirement for someone to call themselves a pet behavior counselor or a behaviorist.

As you develop your own catalog of handouts, pay special attention to the author's credentials and the types of recommendations that they give. With nationally or internationally recognized credentials come accountability, continuance of education, and often peer review and support. Below are a few resources to consider.

Life Learn Client Education (lifelearn.com) is an online pet health library that offers a variety of handouts and behavior-related articles that are authored by board-certified veterinary behaviorists. These handouts cover a variety of species, are frequently updated with new information, and are customizable to the name of your practice.

The Veterinary Support Personnel Network (VSPN) (vin.com/vspn) is another great resource. VSPN is a free-to-join network for veterinary professionals in all capacities. Participants can discuss topics on message boards, research issues, and exchange ideas. Most importantly, they offer a free library of client handouts authored by experts in their field.

While you may only access your own personal catalog of handouts on an as-needed basis, other client education materials can be displayed in your exam rooms for clients to peruse while they wait. CattleDog Publishing (cattledogpublishing.com), which was founded by the late veterinary behaviorist Dr. Sophia Yin, is another great resource. This site offers behavior-specific handouts, quarterly newsletters, books, and tools for both professionals and pet owners. One especially helpful tool available is the educational poster. The posters use illustrations to help explain body language in both dogs and cats, appropriate ways to interact with a dog, and information on types of bites. Sharing these documents with your clients can open

your lines of communication and offer a way for both parties to describe behavioral concerns. Fear Free Pets (fearfreepets.com) offers similar information, including handouts and illustrated posters. Documents from both resources can be used interchangeably to educate clients about behavior and help them to recognize fear, anxiety, and stress in their pet.

MORE OPTIONS, BETTER RESULTS

Remember that just as it is with pets, not all people learn and comprehend information in the same way. This is why it is so important to supply various types of resources. Some may learn better by reading, others may be visual learners, and some may need to “marinate” the information before jumping into action. This coincides with a position statement written by the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, which encourages pet owners to search for behavior professionals that are good teachers, respectful of the owner and pet, and ultimately make the client feel comfortable.³

There is no shortage of training advice and recommendations for pets in the form of books, pamphlets, blogs, podcasts, or training professionals. The internet is a resource that even we as professionals turn to for information, but there is also plenty of misinformation that could cause the client and their pet harm. You can support clients in their internet searches by giving them guidelines and supplying them with the list of resources that you have already researched. Consider making a handout that has a list of authors, blogs, YouTube channels, or podcasts that you have pre-approved. Your goal is to bridge the gap between client and professional. They may not feel comfortable directly asking for help and you may not feel confident with the support that you have to offer. Confidence will come with time and practice, but empathy for the client without blame or shame can be given with any skill level.

Speaker Brené Brown says, “In order to empathize with someone's experience you must be willing to believe them as they see it and not how you imagine their experience to be.” Avoid being dismissive or judgmental about clients' concerns. Be careful not to blame owners without understanding the big picture. Remember to put yourself in their position. Take time to appreciate their concern and be respectful in your approach. **TVN**



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