

Finding Help for Serious Behavior Problems



The Maryland SPCA's Behavior Department offers advice for pet owners and behavior classes for dogs. We also offer private evaluations and training. Visit our website (www.mdspca.org) for information about our classes or call our Behavior Department at 410-235-8826, ext. 151 for times and prices for our classes and private consultations. Although we are able to assist pet owners with many types of animal behavior problems, there are some problems we can't resolve because our resources are limited. Nevertheless, please contact us so we can help determine your needs and assist you or make a referral.

Serious Problems

Aggression

There are many reasons an animal may behave aggressively, including fear, dominance, food or object possessiveness, territorial behavior or protective behavior. We can provide detailed handouts explaining the causes of aggression and procedures that should be avoided because they may make the problem worse. An animal that threatens another animal or human by

growling, hissing, baring his teeth, snapping or biting, presents a danger to others. It's necessary to obtain a complete behavioral history through detailed information gathering and direct observation of the animal in his own environment before a diagnosis and recommendations can be made. This can't be accomplished over the phone.

It is important to have a veterinarian examine your pet to evaluate him for possible medical reasons for the aggressive behavior. If it's not a medical problem, you should seek the services of an animal behavior specialist. We may be able to help you, or we can refer you to another animal behavior specialist. If a professional animal behaviorist can't help, it may be best for all concerned to have your pet humanely euthanized. You may either have your own veterinarian euthanize your pet, or you may surrender him to us or another animal shelter. If you choose to surrender your pet to a shelter, please relate all the information you have about his behavior.

Phobias

Some animals, usually dogs, may develop intense, irrational fears, including fear of thunderstorms, firecrackers and other loud noises. Many phobias can be successfully treated using a combination of behavior modification and short-term drug therapy prescribed by a veterinarian. We have several handouts that explain these problems and the types of behavior modification procedures used to work with them. If your pet exhibits this type of behavior, you should contact our behavior department as well as your veterinarian for information about medication. If we can't help you, we can provide you with a referral.

Excessive Grooming

Dogs and cats will sometimes lick themselves excessively until skin sores form, or will pull patches of hair from their bodies. Treatment often involves a combination of drug therapy and behavior modification that can only be obtained through your veterinarian and an animal behavior specialist. If we can't help you, we can provide you with a referral.

Finding Professional Help

If your pet has a serious behavior problem, you should seek help from a veterinarian and an animal behavior specialist. Knowing where to turn can be confusing. People who work with animal behavior problems are not regulated by any government agency and may have very different types of qualifications. You can contact us at 410-235-8826, ext. 151 for help or a referral. If you seek help elsewhere, the advice below may be helpful.

Veterinarian

When your pet has a problem, your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Urinary tract infections, hormone imbalances, neurological conditions, genetic abnormalities, orthopedic problems and dental disease

are just a few examples of medical problems that can influence your pet's behavior. Ask your veterinarian if he has received any specific training in animal behavior, and if not, ask him if he can refer you to an animal behavior specialist or contact our behavior department for help or a referral.

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist

Animal behavior is a specialized field of scientific study. In order to become a certified applied animal behaviorist, an individual must have specialized training in behavior problems in companion animals. The Animal Behavior Society (ABS) grants certification to behaviorists who are academically trained, have experience in the field and meet the ethical standards of the ABS. People who've worked with or trained animals for many years aren't animal behaviorists unless they've received specialized academic training.

Animal Trainer

Some animal trainers are self-taught, and some may have apprenticed under another trainer and/or attended various training seminars. Animal trainers don't usually have specialized academic training in the study of animal behavior. Good animal trainers are knowledgeable about different types of training methods that focus primarily on reinforcing good behavior and use punishment sparingly, appropriately, humanely or not at all. Inappropriate use of correction collars, including using chokers to lift dogs off the ground and "string them up," aren't appropriate or humane training methods and may cause injury to your dog.

- Dog obedience classes are an excellent way to develop a good relationship with your dog and gain more control over him by teaching him to respond reliably to specific commands. However, resolving behavior problems, such as house-soiling, barking, aggression or separation anxiety, requires more than teaching your dog commands. Specific behavior modification techniques must also be used. Some animal trainers also offer behavior consulting services.
- Ask the trainer what methods they use and how they were trained. Go to a class, and if you observe techniques you're not comfortable with, find another trainer. Dog obedience instructors can be endorsed by the National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors (NADOI). Endorsement indicates that instructors have been approved by their peers and use humane methods of training. If the trainer is endorsed by another organization, ask about the criteria for endorsement.

Things to Watch for and Avoid

People Who Guarantee Their Work

Qualified behaviorists and trainers will always do their best for you, but cannot guarantee outcomes, because animals have minds of their own and can never be completely controlled by humans.

People Whose Primary Methods Focus on Punishment

If their recommendations involve choking, hitting or slapping your pet, confinement or isolation, this indicates little or no understanding of animal behavior.

People Who Misrepresent Their Qualifications

People who call themselves animal behaviorists, even though they're not academically trained in animal behavior.

People Who Want to Train Your Pet for You

Most behavior problems are a result of interactions between the animal, the owner and the environment. Giving your pet to someone else to "fix" the problem is rarely successful because these three elements aren't addressed. Owners need to work with the animal in the home environment.

If you're committed to working with your pet and find qualified people to help you, the chances are good that you'll successfully resolve your pet's problem behaviors.

