

Misbehavin' No More

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS FOR BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

What would you give to make your pet's behavior problems disappear? Believe it or not, most issues can be resolved in three simple steps. Follow along, and your pet will be humming "Ain't Misbehavin'" in no time!

Rule Out Medical Problems

Be careful not to confuse a behavior problem with a health issue. For instance, cats with feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) often urinate outside their litter boxes. Prescribed medications can also have behavioral side effects. Consider the commonly prescribed medicine prednisone, an anti-inflammatory steroid. Side effects include increased water consumption and, as a result, increased urine output. Some of the cleanest dogs I know have house-training lapses when taking prednisone, unless their guardians provide additional elimination walks. Whenever medication is prescribed for your pet, ask about the side effects so you can be prepared.

Watch Your Reward Process

To paraphrase Thorndike's Law of Effect, rewarded behavior is likely to increase in frequency and unrewarded behavior is likely to decrease in frequency. Take Miss Puss. Each morning, she taps you on the face at four o'clock, letting you know that she'd like a can of kitty morsels. She seems in dire need of a meal, so you do her bidding—and unwittingly reward her behavior. You can bet she'll be back the next morning! She has learned that tapping yields tasty treats. However, if you had turned a cold shoulder to her early-morning pleas, Puss would have had no reward and no reason to try that tactic again.

What to do? You resolve to hang tough and ignore Miss Puss's entreaties from now on. But be warned: what started out as a gentle love tap may now escalate to a forceful, extended-claw swat. This worsening behavior is called an "extinction burst." The animal throws everything she's got into the behavior that once netted her a reward, testing what it may take to garner a payoff before she gives up and moves on. Her poor guardian must remain unmoved in order to extinguish the misbehavior. Giving in teaches the animal that a concerted effort just might work.

Sometimes, figuring out what rewards an animal can be tricky. Consider canine greeting behavior. You walk through the front door, and Bouncing Betty greets you with a well-placed slam to your solar plexus. You double over in pain and holler a few choice expletives. Is this

rewarding to Betty? Yes—you have lowered your face closer to her, and she has your attention. Dogs are like children—both prefer negative attention to no attention at all. Withdrawal of attention (walking back out the door or turning to face the wall) whenever her paws are off the floor would remove Betty's rewards. To encourage appropriate behavior, teach her to sit, or pay attention to her only when she has all four paws on the floor. Note: Sometimes we are so relieved when bad behavior has stopped that we don't acknowledge good acts. Don't forget to add a quiet "good pup" or slip Betty a tidbit to celebrate a job well done.

Consider Environmental Management

Some guardians are training junkies—in the best sense. For them, resolving problems by teaching alternate behaviors is a pleasure. Others are less committed to training and more interested in keeping things simple. If that is your philosophy, environmental management may suit you better. Does one really need to spend countless hours creating setups to teach Snoopy to stay out of the garbage, when just keeping the trash can out of reach would suffice? Don't want the cat on the bed? Close the bedroom door. Hate it when the puppy eats the kids' toys? Put the toys away when the pup is out and put the pup away (in a crate or gated area) when the toys are spread all over the living room. It's quick and easy and may be just what the overscheduled guardian needs to resolve certain problems. Note: Please make sure not to abuse this solution by socially isolating your companion animal in a crate, garage, yard, or basement for long hours every day.

These three steps can make most perplexing pet problems vanish. But if yours persist, contact a Certified Pet Dog Trainer or an applied animal behaviorist to learn what other tricks they have up their sleeves.



Jacque Lynn Schultz, CPDT
ASPCA Companion Animal Programs Adviser
National Shelter Outreach