



When It Comes to Behavior, Avoid Labels

Aggression, for instance, can be very specific instead of generalized. Here's what you need to consider.

We often talk to people whose dogs have displayed some sort of aggressive behavior in one context — and who have then become concerned about their dogs' behavior in a variety of unrelated situations.

For example, we recently talked to a dog owner whose dog had been in the habit of playing with a neighbor's dog and, surprisingly, the neighbor's rabbit. Both dogs behaved admirably toward the rabbit, with no evidence of predatory or any other type of aggression. Unfortunately, the neighbors acquired a baby rabbit as a companion for their adult and allowed the rabbits and the dogs together without any introductory process. Not long after, the new baby rabbit was found dead in the yard. It's not known whether one or both dogs were involved in the incident, but our client is now concerned that this is an indication that her dog will begin displaying aggression toward other dogs and people.

In another recent case, we were asked to evaluate a small terrier that had apparently jumped on and perhaps nipped (accounts of the incident vary) a home service worker who was evaluating the family's potential as a foster family for young children. The concern was that the dog would be a danger to young children.

When attempting to use past behavior to make predictions about future behavior, it's important to remember

that threats and aggression can be quite context-specific. We encounter many dogs that have aggression problems with other dogs but are fine with people. The reverse can also be true.

Predatory Behavior & Aggression

In addition, predatory behavior toward small animals is not a good predictor of aggression in other contexts. Many owners fear, because their dogs chase and would likely kill squirrels and birds, that this is an indication that their dogs will not be safe around babies. There is no evidence of a correlation between these behaviors.

As an example of how aggressive behavior can be in response to even more specific stimuli, many dogs coexist peacefully with family cats but still chase, and sometimes harm, unfamiliar stray cats they may encounter. So aggression isn't necessarily a consistent response to a particular class of stimuli.

This likely accounts for what happened to the unfortunate baby rabbit. The adult rabbit was a familiar entity to the dogs that they apparently viewed as a conspecific (peer). The new baby rabbit was not familiar and was viewed as prey, which resulted in its death.

The small terrier was quite fearful outside the home. Despite her fear, she displayed no aggressive or threatening behavior when I picked her up and held her, even though she clearly

was quite anxious about having me do so. Dogs that are threatening at the door are often quite friendly, or even fearful, when they encounter unfamiliar people in other situations. When around small children, the terrier was actually less fearful than she was in reaction to adults.

Because aggressive behavior can be so specific, behavior modification plans must be as well. It's common for dog owners to be told, for example, that if their dog guards its food it must be denied certain privileges in other contexts. Owners of such dogs are often told not to allow their dogs to get on the bed, go through doors ahead of them or walk ahead on walks, or to pet the dog without requiring the dog to obey a command.

Recommendations that focus on controlling the dog in situations unrelated to the aggressive context may be irrelevant. A dog that guards its food, for example, may willingly get off the bed when told to do so. Pulling on the leash and going through doorways first are nothing more than training issues and are not correlated with aggression. Similarly, controlling the dog's access to privileges within the family will have no effect on its behavior toward visitors.

Labels Can Be Misleading

Because aggression can be very specific rather than generalized, labeling a dog as possessive, dominant, territorial or predatory can be misleading. Labels imply that a dog's behavior is consistent across a variety of circumstances, which may not be the case at all.

To better understand and, when necessary, modify aggressive or other kinds of behavior, it may be more useful simply to focus on describing the behavior and what triggers it. **DW**



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We regret that we cannot respond to individual inquiries about canine health or behavior matters. In this column, we often mention useful products to help with behavior issues, and they can be ordered at www.animalbehaviorassociates.com

Make Him Stop!

Dr. Hetts explains that the solution lies instead in creating alternative behaviors for your dog.

Most people who contact me are trying to get their dogs to stop displaying a particular behavior. They want to know how to stop their dogs from barking, from soiling in the house, from fighting with other dogs, from jumping on guests — and the list goes on.

What's important to realize is that the solution lies not so much in stopping these behaviors, but in creating alternative behaviors that are more acceptable to you and likely healthier for your dog.

During behavior consultations, I often talk about two behavior modification techniques called counterconditioning and desensitization. It seems that a fair amount of confusion exists about these procedures, so I thought it might be helpful to clarify what they are.

Although often — but not always — used together, counterconditioning and desensitization are two separate procedures. I've seen them explained as though they were the same thing. They most definitely are not.

To illustrate the difference, I'll use a case involving my Irish setter, Coral. When Coral was younger, she experienced fear when approached by overly exuberant dogs. To help her overcome this response, I might use both desensitization and counterconditioning techniques.

Desensitization (or more accurately, systematic desensitization) is the incremental exposure to a particular event, or

stimulus, beginning at a stimulus intensity that evokes only a small response. To desensitize Coral to this interaction, I might start by introducing her only to quiet, small dogs, and gradually build up to high-energy, large dogs in a series of "baby steps."

Counterconditioning would also come into play because I would want Coral to be relaxed and unafraid (and even enjoy) having these rambunctious dogs approach her. So, as another dog approached, I would offer Coral a treat, touch and pet her, show her a favorite toy or give her something else that she enjoys.

Counterconditioning comes in two forms. In Coral's example, my goal is to change her emotional state, so that she "feels good" about exuberant dogs, rather than feeling afraid. Coral learns that the approach of a dog predicts a treat for her. This is classical counterconditioning.

Remember Pavlov's dogs? In Pavlov's experiments, the dogs were classically conditioned to salivate when they heard a bell because they knew food would follow. In addition to involuntary behaviors like salivation, classical conditioning can also change emotional states.

Looking for Voluntary Behaviors

Operant counterconditioning, on the other hand, involves voluntary behaviors. This is likely the type of counterconditioning most people are familiar with. Any kind of operant conditioning is

based on consequences: Behaviors that result in pleasant consequences will be repeated, while those that cause aversive outcomes will not.

Let's say that I want to countercondition Coral to sit when visitors step through my door, rather than jumping on them. In operant counterconditioning, a stimulus like the sight of a visitor becomes the cue for a specific, voluntary behavior — in this case, sitting. Sitting would be rewarded with attention, while jumping up would result in a visitor ignoring Coral and walking away from her.

Operant counterconditioning wouldn't work very well with Coral's fear of exuberant dogs. If I tried to make her sit instead of shying away, she probably wouldn't do so because of her fearful emotional state. So my goal is to change her emotional state because that is what is motivating her to shy away. Classical counterconditioning is often the technique of choice for changing emotionally motivated behaviors.

Counterconditioning of both types usually works best if we can use desensitization at the same time. For example, it will be easier to get Coral to sit if the visitor is just standing quietly rather than making a big fuss over her; or if I keep Coral six feet away from the door rather than allowing her to go to the doorway. Less intense contact with the visitor will make sitting easier. For the same reason, I'd start with calm, quiet dogs rather than exuberant ones.

For more information, I recommend *Excel-erated Learning: Explaining how dogs learn and how best to teach them* by Dr. Pamela Reid and *How Dogs Learn* by Drs. Mary Burch and Jon Bailey, both available from Dogwise.com. We also conduct a four-session telecourse on animal learning, which is also available on CD, and can be found at our website, www.animalbehaviorassociates.com. DIY



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