

Analyse this: a practical guide to behaviour problems in dogs

Deputy Head of Canine Behaviour and Training at Dog's Trust, Steve Goward, explored the topic of behaviour at this year's IVNA Dog's Trust event. Here, Mark McCorry RVN, share some of his top tips

COPING WITH BEREAVEMENT

Most owners experience disenfranchised grief - a grief that cannot be displayed openly – when their beloved dog passes away. It is, therefore, of huge importance that we as veterinary nurses take time to listen and take into account the individual needs of the owner during this difficult time and to attempt to identify that some may need support, while others need information.

In the veterinary profession, we are in a unique position in that we deal with euthanasia – a moral and ethical dilemma that people don't normally face. At times the decision to euthanise is due to financial restraints, which can result in feelings of guilt and regret in the extreme.

This topic raises several questions, for example, do we have the time and skills to help an owner during this and after? Perhaps pet bereavement counselling is something that requires more training and education for veterinary nurses. At the very least, we should be able to provide referral information for more experienced people in this area if required.

It is not just human beings who experience grief. Steve discussed the interesting question 'do dogs grieve?' Assuming we all agree that dogs experience rich and deep emotions, then we can assume dogs do feel loss. Anecdotally dogs have presented with lethargy, anorexia, changes in behaviour or illness following the loss of a companion dog. Explaining the importance of supporting the remaining dog may actually help the owner to get through this difficult time. Steve recommends the owner focuses on having fun, doing new and interesting activities with the dog. This can include going to new locations, training or meeting new dogs – whatever the individual dog likes to do.

HOW TO DEAL WITH ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Steve explained that domestication has given the dog amazing adaptability. Yet this level of adaptability may be the dogs own undoing as it has allowed it to cope in situations that it would otherwise consider abnormal. The dog is a very social species, yet is often housed alone for several hours on a daily basis. Steve travels worldwide helping other animal shelters to improve their standards. Several steps have been taken to ensure the welfare needs of shelter dogs are met and many of these areas can be used to ensure owned dogs get the same level of interaction with plenty of physical and mental activity. Using several studies looking at dogs in shelter environments, Steve explained that particular areas have

proven to be of benefit in reducing stress and anxiety and thereby increasing the dogs welfare. The importance of providing good uninterrupted sleep, the importance of human contact, basic training and play using games such as fetch, agility, scent work and tug, all help to improve a dogs quality of life.

We must educate owners on the importance of ensuring that their pets have good physical and mental health.

Dogs Trust, in conjunction with other organisations, has developed a 16-week Puppy Plan that is delivered in two parts.

Part one is ideal for breeders and looks at the importance of handling each puppy on a daily basis. The second part is for dogs eight-16 weeks of age. This looks at the importance of habituation and socialisation. For more information see www.thepuppyplan.com

ADDING TO YOUR PACK

Owners often decide to get a second dog and wonder what is the best and safest way to introduce the dogs to one another. As a general rule, the more differences there are between the two dogs (age, sex, size and personality), the more likely they will get on with each other.

- Examine the current house set up. Identify potential problems such as toys, sleeping areas, other resources or setting up baby gates before the new dog arrives.
- Train the current dog using positive reinforcement to be calm and responsive using cues like sit and down. A stationary dog is less threatening.
- Exercise both dogs prior to meeting. Avoid over stimulating activities like fetch.
- Feed each dog a large, tasty meal 45-60 minutes before meeting. This will help keep both relaxed and calm.
- If possible allow each dog to be aware of the others smell before they meet for example, sniff each others bed.
- Both should be on leads. Meet in a neutral area to avoid resource issues – a long lead walk in a park neither dog has been to before.
- Never force an interaction – allow the dogs to ignore each other until they are ready.
- At home, remove all potential resources that may cause conflict for example, toys, food, beds.
- Avoid giving any one dog more attention than the other.
- Set up separate bedding areas and feed in separate locations.

I NURSING

- Don't intervene in small disputes, allow the dogs to resolve minor issues – keep leads on indoors to ensure fights can be broken up safely if required.
- Owners should be provided with information on canine body language (see Table 1) to ensure both dogs safety.

A NEW ADDITION

The arrival of a baby can be a stressful time for dog owner as inevitably owners have less time to spend with their dog. To ensure a smooth integration, Steve recommends that we advise owners to prepare the dog well in advance before the baby is due.

Before the baby arrives:

- Build up strong basic obedience and work on any behaviour issues. Essentials include sit, down, stay, walking on a loose leash, not jumping up and a good recall.
- Ignore and leave the dog alone for short periods of time with a tasty, long lasting chew.
- Get the dog used to no-dog zones now.
- Train the dog to walk calmly next to the buggy and work on training the dog while holding a doll.
- Get the dog used to baby items like prams, high chairs, play pens, etc.
- Get a sounds CD with baby noises on it to habituate the dog to all possible sounds.
- Integrate the new routine as much as possible.

When baby arrives:

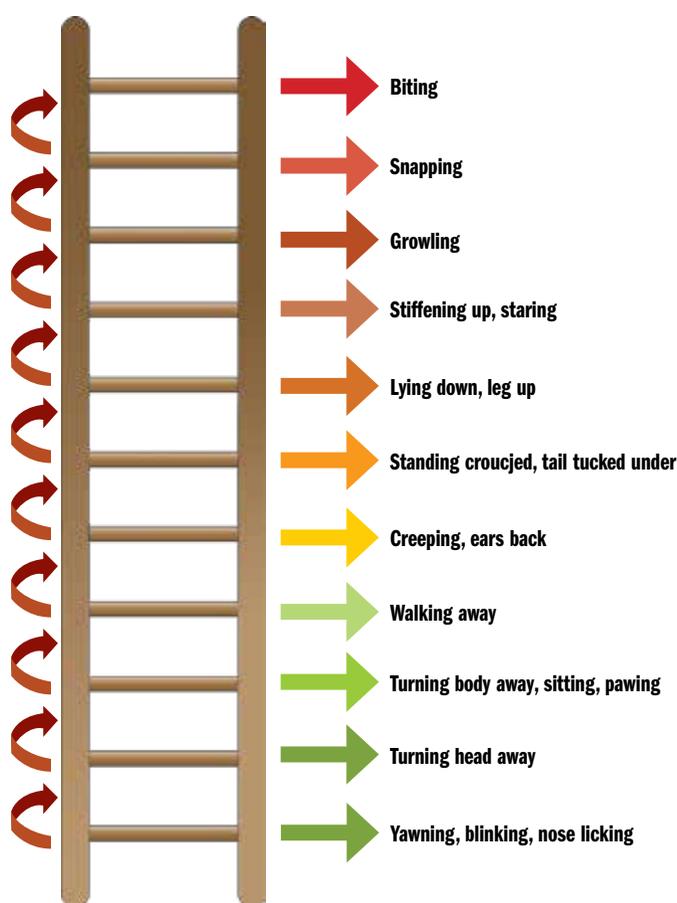
- Keep interactions calm and relaxed.
- Teach the dog how to approach the baby properly and gently – guide and train the dog with appropriate behaviours around the baby.
- Build positive associations with the baby by giving the dog very tasty treats and praise when it behaves around the baby.
- Never shout at, hit or punish the dog for interacting inappropriately – this will lead to negative associations when the baby is around.
- Challenge the dog physically and mentally to avoid boredom – exercise, activity feeders, kong's, chew toys and training.
- Never leave the dog and baby alone.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

The afternoon practical session is always a highlight of the Dogs Trust days and this year was no exception. With the help of Anto the beagle, Steve demonstrated the benefits of training in building a dogs confidence. Throughout the session Steve pointed out body language observed, possible meanings and how to respond. This is always of benefit to nurses as it helps us identify dogs that may potentially be stressed or uneasy and demonstrates ways to help make them feel comfortable.

This years range of topics proved very useful for nurses on a day-to-day basis. Owner education is vital to ensuring a long lasting, satisfying relationship between dog and owner.

Table 1: The ladder of aggression



Steve has highlighted the veterinary nurses role while providing a wealth of information that can be used to help make our interactions with dogs more rewarding and less stressful, while providing knowledge that can be passed on to our clients.

REFERENCES

1. Coppola CL, Grandin T, Enns MR (2006) Human interaction and cortisol: Can human contact reduce stress for shelter dogs? *Physiology and Behaviour* 87.3
2. Doka K (1989) *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognising Hidden Sorrow*. Lexington Books
3. Mertens PA, Unshelm, J (1996) Effects of Group and Individual Housing on the Behavior of Kennelled Dogs in Animal Shelters. *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals* 9.1
4. Morley C, Fook J (2005) The importance of pet loss and some implications for service Mortality: Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying 10.2
5. Patronek GJ, Glickman LT, Beck A M, McCabe GP, Ecker C (1996) Risk factors for relinquishment of dogs to an animal shelter. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 209.3
6. Rosado B, Garcia-Belenguer S, Leon M, Palacio J (2009) A comprehensive study of dog bites in Spain. 1995–2004. *The Veterinary Journal* 179.3
7. Ross C, Baron-Sorensen J (2007) *Pet Loss and Human Emotion: What's New?* Routledge, New York
8. Shepherd K (2002) Chapter 2: Development of behaviour, social behaviour and communication in dogs. In: Horwitz, D. Mills, D and Heath, S. (Eds) *BSAVA Manual of Canine and feline Behavioural Medicine*. BSAVA, Gloucester. 8-20
9. Stephen JM, Ledger RA (2002) A longitudinal evaluation of urinary cortisol in kennelled dogs. *Canis familiaris. Physiology and Behaviour* 87.5