



DOG BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

Why do they do it and what can you do?

Many dogs show unwanted behaviour, whether they have come from rescue or not, but why does this happen and what can you do about it? All dogs are individuals, have different genetics and experiences that will shape how they turn out and interact with their owners – so it's really hard, if not impossible to generalise about them. However, there are some common factors that could create a problem or problems in dogs and we will describe them here.

We should also remember that some behaviours, although unwanted from a human's point of view may be totally normal and natural from a dog's point of view – e.g. barking at the doorbell or digging in the garden. These kinds of behaviours often need a simpler approach than 'abnormal' behaviour problems and may involve positive reinforcement training to teach the dog to perform an acceptable alternative behaviour instead – however, sometimes they can be difficult to change, simply because they are natural, normal behaviours.

Ultimately though, any dog with a behaviour problem causing concern must first be seen by a vet to rule out possible physical causes, before being referred to a reputable qualified behaviourist.

Why do we see behaviour problems in dogs?

Often, a behaviour problem is a symptom of something (or things) being wrong with the dog and the actual behaviour that we see is the way that the dog is trying to cope with the situation.

This could be as a result of illness or pain, or as a result of something in the dog's environment

- either in the present – what he is experiencing here and now, or,
- in the past – i.e. something that he has learned by experience

but basically there is usually some sort of motivation or cause, for the dog to act in a certain way, which may or may not be a problem for the owner.

For example:

Motivation = **fear** of being grabbed, hurt and pulled off the sofa
Behaviour = bite to protect myself

Motivation = **fear** of being left alone
Behaviour = panic, tear up the carpet and sofa

Sometimes the unwanted behaviour can become learned i.e. when it is successful in removing a threat, which makes the dog feel better, and then the dog will use it automatically when in the same, or a similar situation in the future. This means that the dog has little choice over whether he shows that behaviour or not under those circumstances, which makes punishment very unfair and ineffective. If punishment is used, particularly where the behaviour is motivated by fear, it can make the problem much worse since this will simply increase anxiety and fear in the dog even further.



So what kind of unwanted behaviour could your dog show?

Some dogs will show the more obvious signs that something is wrong – behaviour such as aggression, destructive behaviour, pooping or weeing in the home, unwanted barking or self-mutilation are easy to see. Other dogs however, will do the opposite – they'll simply try to avoid situations where they feel worried, or may even suppress or inhibit their behaviour (so do very little), become unhappy and depressed, sleep more and keep out of the way – in fact they may show behaviour that a lot of owners will be happy about – they'll be the quiet dog who seems to be no trouble at all! However, this is not normal and the dog may be suffering inside.

If the dog is later put in a situation where it is unable to avoid the thing that it is frightened of, for example when it is restrained by a lead, or pursued under a table, then the dog might resort to using aggression to defend itself in an attempt to make the threat go away. It is therefore important to recognise signs that your dog is frightened, such as if your dog moves away from things, or shows appeasement behaviours, which are signals that a dog uses to let other dogs know that it is feeling threatened (cowering, lowering its head, flattening or pulling back its ears, or ultimately rolling over to expose its belly). It is equally important to notice and fix this kind of behaviour, as much as the more obvious behaviour problems, before it develops into something more troublesome.

What kind of things could cause a dog to show unwanted behaviour?

What kind of things might make it difficult for a dog to cope with life and living with humans? Here are some of the possible reasons for behaviour problems occurring, but there are many more – please remember though that a behaviour consultation with a professional is the best way to find out what the problem may be for your own dog.

Pain or illness

People can become 'grumpy' and irritable when they are unwell and your dog is no different! A dog suffering physically from pain or illness may be less able to cope with every day and more intense stressful situations, and some illnesses will directly cause certain unwanted behaviour. The first thing we do with any dog that has a behaviour problem (especially aggression) is to get them a health check with the vet, as there is little hope of fixing the problem while the dog is ill.

Incompatible behaviour and attitudes from both owner and dog

Although dog behaviour is affected greatly by experience and learning throughout the dog's life, there is also an innate (or inborn) element to what they do and how they feel, so, we have to think about what kind of natural behaviours thousands of years of evolution have 'programmed' the dog to perform and what he is 'programmed' to expect. Because the dog as we know it has been around for a relatively short time in evolutionary terms, we need to look at the natural behaviour and lifestyle of his many wild relatives to get an idea of what might be going on inside his head – although domestication has of course affected the behaviour that we see in our dogs today.

From looking at the behaviour of other wild dog species (canids) over a 24 hour period we can understand the types of behaviours that your average dog would like to be able to do - although this may of course vary with age and breed/type:

The wild canid 'time budget' looks something like this...

- 12 hours sleeping (not all in one go – but in bouts and naps over a 24 hour period – night and day)
- 3 hours exercising (hunting & scavenging in wild dogs)
- 3 hours eating (including plenty of time chewing)
- 1.5 hours of play
- 1.5 hours of resting
- 1.2 hours of other social contact
- 1.2 hours other behaviours
- 0.6 hours of grooming

And generally most of this time would be spent in the company of other dogs.



During any 24 hour period, your dog needs to act out certain needs, or behaviours, to his or her satisfaction. There are those that **must** be performed - e.g. drinking, feeding, sleeping, toileting. If an essential behaviour is prevented, or rarely allowed, this will lead to suffering.

Other behaviours are not so essential and are a bit more flexible – e.g. playing will provide our dogs with the mental and physical stimulation that will help prevent many of the problematic behaviours that owners frequently complain about, such as 'attention seeking' or destructive behaviour.

So, how else is the dog's 'natural' behaviour relevant to behaviour problems? There are two main problems that can occur:

- firstly, where the dog is trying to do something that is a completely natural behaviour and that he needs to do, but that the owner finds incompatible with his lifestyle. – e.g. the dog digging holes to bury food items in the owner's prize flowerbeds

And then the opposite

- where the owner is expecting the dog to do something that goes completely against everything that evolution and natural behaviour has prepared him for – e.g. being left alone all day while the owner is at work.

In both cases, the owner can become very frustrated and may find it very difficult to train the dog to do otherwise, or to cope – simply because in the first case, it is a normal, natural behaviour for him, whilst in the second case, the dog finds it really difficult to accept something that seems so abnormal to him. Either way, compassion and understanding from the owner can be the first step to resolving the problem.

Fear and the need for safety

This is one of the most important factors in causing behaviour problems - including aggression. Survival is the number one factor in any animal's life and fear is a normal and necessary process by which an animal learns what is dangerous and how to avoid it. Let's start with how a dog will cope with a short term threat to his safety.

Remember that a threat to a dog can be a fear for his own physical safety but he may also react aggressively to defend a threat to his valuable 'resources' – i.e. if he fears that another dog or a human will take something that he needs or values very highly. A dog's resources may include; toys, his food, a tasty chew item, your attention or a favourite comfortable sleeping or resting area such as a sofa, however, this is different for every dog and at different times.

When a dog feels scared or threatened, like most animals, he will usually do at least one of four things. He will:



- freeze (become motionless and hope that the threat goes away)
- flee (run away from the threat to safety)
- fiddle about (show inappropriate, strange or appeasement behaviours for that situation, in an attempt to distract the threat, or show it that they mean no harm)
- fight (show aggressive behaviour, starting from aggressive displays such as growling, teeth baring and snapping, to actually attacking to make the threat go away).

Dogs will always try to avoid fighting and tend to use it as a last resort because there is always a risk posed to their own safety through injury, however, certain circumstances will enable a dog to learn that fighting (or aggressive behaviour) will work best and so he will be likely to use it more often than not. This will usually be because he has tried to freeze, flee and fiddle about, but they haven't worked.

An additional problem is that once an animal has learned to be scared of something, the fear that he feels releases chemicals that affect his brain and memory formation, so that it can actually block new learning.

This means that it is near impossible to teach the dog not to be scared of that something while he is still being exposed to it and consequently resolving the problem can be very difficult, if not impossible.

The mechanisms within the body that cope with fear (and stress) were only meant to be activated in the dog over really short periods – minutes or hours at most. This is because in the wild, you get killed, kill (or attack) or get away from the threat. However, in some homes, dogs have to cope with fear and stress over long periods of time – weeks, months or years. The dog's body just wasn't built to do this and so we see all sorts of problems developing such as depression and aggression, as well as chronic health problems. A dog who is suffering from chronic fear is likely to be 'set off' by the smallest things, so that the owner may not even notice what has triggered the attack, or problem behaviour, from the dog.

Also, if a dog is feeling scared, he is unable to worry about doing anything else except trying to be safe – and this of course will affect his time budget, meaning that he is unable to do many of the normal things that he really needs to. If a dog is feeling scared for most of the time, this of course can lead to major welfare problems.

So what can cause fear and a feeling of lack of safety in the dog?

Sadly there are many causes of fear (short-term and long-term) for our domestic dog, but here are a few to think about.

1. Social isolation

Dogs are a very social species. Wild dogs are rarely, if ever, alone, so it's no wonder that a lot of our dogs cannot cope when we leave them and show separation-related problems. Although we've put dogs in what we regard as safe houses and gardens surrounded by secure fences, this is likely to be pretty irrelevant to the dog and in fact, being put into social isolation for long periods of time can be quite a punishment to many dogs. There's safety in numbers and this is a main reason why so many canine species live in pairs, packs or family groups. Obviously we can't all be there for our dogs 24 hours a day, but we should certainly try to be as much as possible, or provide them with some sort of companionship – ideally another dog, or perhaps a friendly cat, or visits from a helpful neighbour or relative.



If a dog does not feel safe because he is alone, it can be really difficult for him to rest adequately during the day – this can lead to anxiety and even depression. A dog that is anxious is unable to learn anything new and may have difficulty concentrating on any training. This can lead to the owner becoming frustrated since the dog never seems to listen or learn.

Although being left alone without human company can be a major concern, being without canine company of any kind may also have really negative effects. In order to show natural, normal doggy behaviour and to feel safe (especially for many stressed or nervous dogs), living with another suitable dog, or dogs, is very important.

Of course, not everyone can have more than one dog, in which case, regular walks or play-dates with the friendly dog of a friend or family member will certainly be of some benefit. If a dog has dog aggression problems, then a qualified behaviourist should be able to help with choosing another dog and safe introductions.

2. Lack of proper socialisation and habituation

Strictly speaking, socialisation is the process by which a puppy learns that he is a dog, learns about other dogs and how to interact with them appropriately. Habituation is teaching your puppy that strange experiences, objects (including humans and the family cat!) and situations are nothing to be scared of. However, for convenience, these two processes are often put together and just referred to as 'socialisation'.



If a puppy is not socialised properly from the time that he gets into his new home and throughout his first year, this can lead to serious fear and aggression problems in later life. It is therefore, **very important**. All that is needed is to let the puppy experience something new and praise good, calm behaviour. However, it is essential that your puppy is introduced to new things gradually and never becomes scared - so if the puppy shows a nervous reaction to anything new, he must be calmly removed from what is scaring him until he seems okay and then try again later in a less scary manner.

Socialisation and socialisation classes are incredibly popular these days and will benefit many puppies, however, some may have had traumatic early lives – early weaning, puppy farms, pet shops, being kept in unsuitable kennel conditions - and then, if they are put into homes with no other dogs and owners who are out for most of the day, there is real potential for things to go wrong. Socialisation that is too intense (too many new things in a day, or too many potentially scary situations such as a rowdy puppy class) can actually be highly damaging, so that fears and even phobias can develop. Look for a small puppy class, where the puppies are roughly the same age and interactions are controlled to ensure that the puppies don't become frightened. Your puppy does need to learn through trial and error how to respond appropriately to other dogs, so it is 'normal' and part of his education to be very gently told off by well socialised adult dogs, but this should simply make him stop and think, rather than run away and stop playing/exploring completely.

Habituation (learning about which things won't harm you) can be done at any point of the dog's life. To habituate a dog to something new, you would need to expose the dog to it, but there must never be any fear present. Because there is no fear, the dog will get used to the new thing over time. Dogs need to be habituated to all sorts of things in the environment around them such as noises, cars, vacuum cleaners etc. The more things a dog is habituated to, the less fear he will have in his life and the safer he will generally feel. Perhaps not surprisingly, dogs find it much easier to habituate when there are other family dogs around to show them that there is nothing to worry about.

When fears or phobias have already developed, it is essential to avoid encountering the fear object or situation until you can deal with the problem by changing the dog's perception of the scary thing using 'desensitisation' and 'counter-conditioning' techniques as part of an appropriate behavioural programme, given to you by a qualified behaviourist. This is because the more often you allow the dog to be scared of something, the more scared the dog will become and the more ingrained the fear. Avoidance is definitely the best policy to prevent the problem from getting worse, although the fear won't disappear on its own and behavioural training will be necessary.

3. Use of punishment and negative reinforcement

A dog that feels punished (and usually threatened at the same time) is not going to feel safe in his environment. Frustration and confusion (which can occur just because the dog doesn't understand what we want or what we are doing) can have the same effect. A mixture of both can have really dire results – both emotionally and physically. Dogs that feel punished and confused for long periods of time can suffer from behaviour suppression (i.e. not showing any behaviour – which is abnormal) and eventually something called 'learned helplessness'. Learned helplessness is when the dog actually gives up and stops responding to anything. Sadly, this is what a lot of dog owners want from their dogs – a dog that simply lies in the corner and doesn't bother them – however, this is really detrimental to their welfare – and it can also be dangerous. Dogs in learned helplessness may eventually become unpredictably aggressive – in what they see as a last-ditch attempt to survive.

So do we need to use punishment in training and everyday interactions? We need to look at how dogs learn to understand why it is best left unused.

At the simplest level, learning happens like this:

- if a dog performs a behaviour that is followed by a nice outcome – he is likely to repeat it
- if a dog performs a behaviour that is followed by a nasty or unpleasant outcome – he is likely to stop it

This can happen through 4 processes: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment and negative punishment.

What is Positive reinforcement?

- You give something nice to reward the dog (e.g. give him a treat)
- This increases the chances of the behaviour being repeated
- You end up with a 'happy' dog, who looks forward to training and being with his owner

What is Negative reinforcement?

- You take away something nasty (e.g. stand on the dog's lead until he lays down to relieve the uncomfortable pressure on his neck)
- This increases the chances of behaviour being repeated
- But, the owner has to do something nasty to the dog before taking it away – so the relationship between dog and owner can be damaged

What is Positive punishment?

- You give something nasty or unpleasant (e.g. you smack or shout at the dog)
- This decreases the chances of the behaviour being repeated
- But, the relationship between dog and owner is damaged

What is Negative punishment?

- Take away something nice (e.g. you take away the treat you were going to give the dog, or take away your attention from him)
- This decreases the chances of the behaviour being repeated
- But, without teaching the dog what works to get the reward using positive reinforcement at the same time, there are real risks of serious frustration in the dog – and the relationship between dog and owner can be damaged

Although at first sight negative reinforcement and negative punishment do not seem as nasty as positive punishment, it is actually just as bad for the dog – the same processes within the dog's body are activated and he feels just as punished.

What is wrong with punishment and negative reinforcement?

Even if punishment and negative reinforcement are used 'correctly' they can lead to fear, frustration & confusion– followed by behaviour suppression, depression and potentially, aggressive responses – as well as a complete breakdown of the relationship between dog and owner.

Why is positive reinforcement good?

Simply because it can't do any harm and if you get it wrong, the worst that can happen is that it won't work. Positive reinforcement also has an added 'invisible' bonus – your dog will try much harder to please you because a 'pleasure' chemical (dopamine) in the brain is released when he gets a reward.

How to use positive reinforcement as much as possible during training and everyday life with your dog.

So how do you avoid using punishment and negative reinforcement for unwanted behaviour? Although unfortunately the concept doesn't seem to come very naturally for many humans, the next time your dog does something you don't want, a combination of the following may help your relationship with your dog and increase his feeling of safety around you:

- **Reward wanted behaviour** – encourage and reward behaviour you do want, so that your dog is likely to repeat it in the future.
- **Ignore unwanted behaviour** – don't bring any attention to the behaviour and it may disappear. For some dogs, 'nasty' attention such as a 'telling off' is just as rewarding as positive attention, especially if it is the only attention he gets.
- **Avoid situations where the unwanted behaviour may occur** – the less an unwanted behaviour is practised, the less likely your dog is to do it again. Obviously, if you can completely avoid situations that are likely to provoke an unwanted behaviour you'll probably never see it again!



- **Where unwanted behaviour cannot be ignored or avoided, train an alternative, acceptable behaviour for your dog to perform.** Because your dog feels driven or motivated to do something (i.e. the unwanted behaviour) under certain circumstances, it is much easier and effective to train him to do something different that is acceptable to you, than to try to get the behaviour to stop completely. **For example**, if your dog jumps up at visitors to your house, train a really good 'sit' command. Then every time on meeting visitors, ask for this sit, giving lots of rewards (treats and attention) when his bottom is on the floor. This alternative, acceptable behaviour will very quickly replace the unwanted behaviour as long as you and your visitors are consistent.

But... something we do have to be aware of when using positive reinforcement and rewards in training, is that although positive reinforcement itself cannot do any harm, ending a training session could lead to the risk of negative punishment occurring. If you remember, negative punishment means taking away something nice – the nice in this case may be food rewards, or even owner attention and interaction. These can become particularly important for dogs who have very little excitement in life, or have to deal with a lot of social isolation, or who do not have enough to eat or enough variation in the diet.

When training is the most exciting part of a dog's life, or treats are too exciting compared to the normal food, or especially if he is hungry, when the rewards are not given quickly enough or when the treats/attention stops at the end of a session, this can lead to frustration for the dog and eventually there may be some resentment or aggressive behaviour towards the owner. However, this is relatively easy to prevent in most dogs by putting a few simple rules into place:

- make sure that the dog generally has a good quality of life
- feed a meal around 30 minutes before a training session
- give a nice chewy long-lasting treat such as a pig's ear to relax with as soon as the session is over.

4. Dominance Reduction Rules

Sadly, an outdated, but still widely used, method of treating unwanted dog behaviours by some trainers has been to assume that all dogs want to be 'dominant' and to deal with this the owner must be the 'alpha leader' or 'pack leader' by following particular 'one size fits all' rules. These may include things like always eat before your dog, never let your dog sleep in your bedroom, make the dog get up if he is lying in your way and don't let your dog pull you on the lead – all things that apparently make you 'more dominant' than your dog. It is claimed that these rules are based on the natural behaviour and dominance hierarchies of Grey Wolves – however, the studies that were used to base these assumptions on were made using captive wolf packs that showed very unnatural behaviour. Wolves (and other wild canine species) in the wild do not have constant disputes over dominance – they live in family groups and share duties relatively peacefully.

Additionally, it is highly unlikely that dogs think we are dogs or that they are human and so wouldn't try to be dominant over us anyway – as the whole dominance idea can only be used within the same species, so it can't cross over from dogs to humans in a group. Amazingly, it's actually been known for around 30 years that dominance doesn't actually work in the way that some 'trainers' have led us to believe. Instead, what is relevant is something called Resource Holding Potential (RHP) – which we will touch upon later.

Dogs Trust believes that Dominance Reduction Rules can be detrimental to a dog's well-being because they are actually based on negative punishment, negative reinforcement and in some cases plain old positive punishment – e.g. you make the dog get up (take away his comfy position and snoozing), you make him wait when he is hungry until you have eaten in front of him (increasing his frustration), you don't let him in the bedroom at night (take away his social contact) etc, etc. The use of techniques based upon punishment, particularly physical punishment, risk increasing anxiety in a dog's relationship with its owner and potentially leading to an escalation of aggression.



Fortunately most owners find it hard to stick to these rules for very long, because they feel like they're being 'mean' to their dogs, but if they do stick to them there are no prizes for guessing what can happen – suppression of behaviour, and in some cases even learned helplessness and depression, which may eventually lead to aggression.

Our approach to changing a dog's behaviour is very different. Rather than simply using punishment to stop a behaviour, we would identify **why** it is showing the behaviour, for example what is it fearful of, or what is reinforcing the behaviour and then use behaviour modification techniques based on positive methods to

remove the dog's motivation for showing the behaviour e.g. by removing the fear emotion, or teaching it that an alternative behaviour gets rewarded in that situation.

What a dog needs rather than an 'alpha leader' or boss, is something called a secure attachment figure. This is more of a mother/aunt/uncle figure who the dog feels safe with and has a good relationship built on mutual trust. This can be a person or another (usually older) dog in the family, but the point is that the bonds between the attachment figure and the dog give him a secure emotional base (an in-built feeling of safety) from which to explore the world. Poor relationships can lead to a lack of security or stability – and this of course, affects feelings of safety.

One of the problems with the dominance reduction rules is that they destroy the relationship with your dog, remove any secure emotional base he may have and his personal safety disappears. If there is more than one dog in the family (as there often are in the homes of those who promote these rules), the company of these others, who they may have strong bonds with can help them cope; but if a dog is on his own, he can soon feel that life is not worth living. Unfortunately again, the listless, quiet dog in the corner is often the dog that some owners want rather than the real, active, inquisitive, playfully bouncy dog that he should be – and that is likely to be why the rules have become so ingrained in today's populist dog literature and TV programmes.

Rather than trying to dominate a dog, we think it is much better to be a friend to him, train him kindly, interact with him, care for and accept him for the dog that he should be. Whilst it can be a good idea to introduce consistent common-sense rules around the home that you want your dog to comply with for safety and perhaps convenience, these should be trained using positive reinforcement and not be based on trying to reduce his 'dominance status'. There's nothing wrong with providing some level of leadership to a dog, but remember that good leaders earn respect and trust through benevolence (kindness and generosity), not force.

If you need behaviour advice then it really has to be tailor-made for your individual dog by a qualified behaviourist, not a generalised set of rules from a book that may make the problem far worse.

5. Not having enough resources

Many owners may resort to using dominance reduction programmes after being advised by someone that their dog is 'dominant' after showing aggression, but as we now know, this is not the case – so what is actually happening? So-called 'dominance' issues (which are actually RHP issues) usually arise when resources are scarce – so if you ensure your dog has enough of everything he needs, this type of aggression should never occur in the first place.



A dog's resources include space, food, and water, comfortable sleeping areas, toys, attention – in fact everything that a dog needs to survive and be happy. A dog can become defensive over resources when they are scarce or when he thinks they are being threatened – because they then become very valuable to him. For a dog to feel safe in his environment and to prevent this type of defensive aggression starting, it is essential to ensure that he has plenty of resources, and especially those he seems to value most. For example, puppies from larger litters, that are fed from a single bowl, can learn to 'compete' for food in order to get enough to eat.

The less confident puppies may even use aggression to ensure that they get their fair share. When they go into a human home and someone approaches them whilst they are eating it is only natural for them to growl at the person to let them know that they are prepared to defend their food. The old fashioned advice used to be that if your puppy growls you should take its food away and teach it that you are the 'dominant' one. Unfortunately all that this is likely to do is to confirm to the puppy that it does need to worry when people approach it when it is eating and the aggression escalates! Due to the presence of outdated dominance concepts in the popular media, food guarding and aggression around the food bowl are unfortunately all too common, but can be treated with advice from a qualified behaviourist.

Apart from fear and safety, what other issues may cause problem behaviour, or make it worse?

If a dog is also struggling to cope in the most basic parts of his life such as eating and sleeping, this can make coping with fears and effective training very difficult, but there are practical ways of improving these for

a dog. Once these issues are sorted out however, it can then be possible to use behaviour modification programmes to tackle the specific issues.

Food and issues around eating

At the most basic level what your dog eats, how often your dog eats and where your dog eats are really important to him. If your dog is a picky eater, or bolts his food in a few gulps, this can be a sign that something isn't quite right. Many behaviour problems can be aggravated by the type of food a dog is given, because this affects the serotonin levels (the 'feel-good' chemical) within his brain and serotonin is very much implicated in depression and aggression. How often and when your dog is fed is also a major factor, since some dogs, like us, can suffer from low blood sugar and this condition makes it very difficult for dogs to stay calm, when faced with a stressful situation.

What is appropriate food and drink?

Fortunately, most dog owners are aware that dogs need fresh or clean water to be available at all times, however not everyone is aware of what might be appropriate food. Although the majority of commercial dog diets on the market are appropriate in the nutritional sense, they may not be so good for your dog's behavioural needs. A bowl of dry biscuits does not provide for any behavioural needs of the dog – however, these days there are many commercial 'wet' diets that may be more suitable. Please remember that any major changes that you make to your dog's diet should be **discussed with your vet** and we can't make recommendations about what your dog should eat, however, from a behavioural point of view some dogs may benefit from a good protein source (e.g. cooked meat) mixed with cooked vegetables and/or a small amount of brown pasta. However at the very least a good choice of flavours and tasty additions to dry biscuits will make the world of difference to a dog. The other important aspect is that food should be easily accessible – if your dog has to work too hard for his main meals when hungry, the whole experience can become very stressful and frustrating for him.

How often to feed?

The key here is to ensure that your dog doesn't ever get really hungry – so at least twice a day, preferably more. Dogs that are hungry can become obsessed with food and consequently other resources, which can lead them to becoming protective of these things and possibly aggressive. A dog that is constantly looking for food can become very stressed and find it difficult to behave 'normally' for most of the day. Being exercised before the first meal of the day may also lead to problems in some dogs, so it may be feasible to feed a small amount about an hour before a walk and two hours before strenuous exercise.

Opportunities to chew

Wild dogs and other canines spend a lot of time chewing. This is a very important activity that keeps your dog occupied, as well as releasing chemicals in the brain which reduce anxiety. Not all bones are suitable for chewing - cooked bones can be very dangerous, but your dog could try large raw meaty beef bones from the butcher. Other items such as dried pig's ears, dried tripe sticks, stuffed Kong toys or bull's pizzles are a good alternative, but always check with your vet to find out what is suitable for your own dog. Chewable items should always be given after a meal when the dog is not starving hungry, or the dog may become frustrated at the difficulty of eating the food.



Bowl suitability

Some dogs may have a problem with eating or drinking out of their bowls. The problem can be associated with the size of bowl (often not big enough or too deep), what the bowl is made of (shiny bowls can be a problem) and where it is put down in the room (i.e. too close to doorways, or where the dog feels vulnerable). There may also be problems when the dog's name tags clink against the bowl when he eats. All of these things could make eating a very stressful activity and if so, will be detrimental to the dog's welfare. Simple solutions like not using a bowl at all, but just putting the food straight onto a wipe-clean mat or flat piece of cardboard may make all the difference to a picky eater or bolter – why not give it a try and see what happens?

Social eating

Wild dogs eat together and domestic dogs also really need company to feel safe when eating. This may be eating with another dog, eating in the same room with you while you are having your dinner, or just having

you around until he finishes his meal. Remember that you do not need to eat before your dog – this makes no sense at all to your dog, is quite punishing and will only frustrate and encourage him to beg.

Be careful about where you feed your dog

As well as the position within the room (for instance, some dogs may not like eating near doorways), the room itself is very important. If your dog is fed in the kitchen, but is also put there when you have to go out and leave him, or is shut in there when visitors come, he'll probably not feel happy about eating in there. Your dog will associate the room with feeling negatively punished and/or socially isolated and may not want to eat there.

Comfort

Dogs need to be physically comfortable to be happy and if they are prevented from the following, unwanted behaviour may be the result:

- They need to be able to wee and poo when needed – at an appropriate time and in an appropriate area (appropriate to the dog's needs – not just the humans!). Training your dog from an early age exactly where you want him to toilet is essential – use plenty of positive reinforcement and try to avoid using intermediate materials like newspaper, if you want to avoid problems later. Remember that having an older dog around for a puppy to copy and learn from should really help!
- They need to be kept at a suitable temperature (for the type of dog) - not too hot or too cold
- They need to be allowed to lick/groom themselves – and feel comfortable (non-matted fur etc)
- They need to be able to stretch out and be allowed to do plenty of rolling on appropriate surfaces

Remember that housetraining problems and conditions such as diarrhoea or colitis are all possible signs of stress and/or a behavioural issue.

Sleeping

As we've already said, a normal healthy dog will sleep or doze in many sessions across the day and night, adding up to 12-14 hours over a 24 hour period. Dogs sleeping more than this are likely to be depressed and those sleeping less than this are likely to be what we call hypervigilant (overly anxious). The amount of sleep a dog gets directly affects the serotonin levels in his brain. Serotonin levels directly affect behaviours like depression and aggression – and depression directly affects serotonin levels. Because of this, it is very easy for a vicious cycle to develop and problems to escalate. However, there are several ways to improve sleep patterns in a dog and these include the following:

Providing an appropriate bed or sleeping surface

The key thing here is room (and comfort) as many dogs need the opportunity to be able to lay flat on their side with their legs out to achieve true, good quality REM sleep – something that can be really difficult in round beds or in crates that are too small. He will need access to comfortable beds during the night and the day (and the choice to be able to sleep where he prefers), so that he can sleep comfortably at any time. REM sleep is essential for processing the day's events, learning from them and forming new memories.



The temperature must be appropriate for the dog

Some heavy coated breeds may not be able to sleep if too hot and dogs like Whippets easily become too cold.

They need to sleep with others

Here the safety aspect comes in again. Wild dogs sleep in groups with individuals taking turns to be awake on 'guard duty'. Dogs forced to spend the night alone may not feel safe enough to sleep properly and this will impact on their behaviour during the day. Dogs are much happier sleeping with other dogs, but especially if they are in a room with a human family member.

So what is the best way to fix behaviour problems?

When we look to change a dog's unwanted behaviour, it is far more effective and kinder to:

1. change or remove the cause (which may often be an underlying emotion such as fear)
 - which means that if there is **no motivation** for the behaviour it should **stop**
- than
2. trying to stop the behaviour, but not addressing the motivation or cause
 - which usually means **punishing** the dog until it **stops showing** the unwanted behaviour or suppresses it.

Sadly, the second way is sometimes used by dog trainers/behaviourists through the use of punishment or dominance reduction techniques – however this is not the way that Dogs Trust would recommend, because:

- The dog will still feel the same way inside (stressed or scared) although he is not allowed to show it,
- this leads to further suffering and
- may then lead to other possibly more serious problems (including health problems) popping up as the dog tries to cope with the motivation in another way.

Sometimes, because the unwanted behaviour has become a learned behaviour in the dog (he has done it so often that he cannot do anything else!), even though we use the first method and have taken away the motivation, the behaviour does not stop. When this happens we have to do some training to teach him to do something else that is acceptable. This will only be effective however, if we have taken away the motivation or cause first.

So, in practical terms this may mean avoiding anything that causes fear and making sure that the dog is happy and has all of his needs met. The next step can then be to train a new emotion and therefore, a new behaviour in the dog in response to the original cause. This may sound strange, but it is as perfectly possible to train a dog to feel an emotion (e.g. feel 'relaxed'), as it is to train a 'sit' or 'down'!

What should you do if your dog has a behaviour problem?

Because every dog is an individual with a different history, lifestyle, personality, breed type etc, you can't just read a factsheet, read a book, or watch a TV programme and copy the advice in the hope that you'll be able to fix your dog's problem.

What is needed, especially where aggression is concerned, is tailor-made advice following a consultation; which will involve history taking of the dog and problem, identification of the cause or motivation, addressing the way the dog is managed in everyday life and then applying appropriate behaviour modification programmes.

So if the problem is a serious one (or if you are worried at all about making a less serious problem worse), please see a qualified behaviourist on referral from your vet. To do this, you'll need to visit your vet to make sure that there are no physical causes for the behaviour – discomfort, pain and hormone imbalances resulting from illnesses or injury must be treated and ruled out before embarking on a behaviour modification programme. After a veterinary check ask your vet for a referral to a good behaviour counsellor.



What makes a good behaviourist?

It can be a real minefield when it comes to looking for a decent behaviourist, since anyone can currently call themselves one without having to show qualifications of any sort. So please be careful and remember that a good, skilled behaviourist will not need to resort to punishment (positive or negative) or negative reinforcement, or insist that you use dominance reduction techniques when treating your dog. They should have a thorough understanding of natural dog behaviour and recommend a behaviour modification programme based on positive reinforcement.

Don't choose a behaviourist that doesn't require a referral from your vet – the vet is responsible for the health and welfare of your dog and has to be happy

with your behaviourist's methods. Depending on what the problem is with your dog, your behaviourist may need to work with your vet if medication is required.

The cost of a behaviour consultation varies enormously and a high cost is certainly not a guarantee of quality. If you have pet insurance, check your policy to see if they will cover the cost as many policies will cover referral to a qualified behaviour professional.

If your dog was adopted from Dogs Trust, please remember that a free behavioural back-up service is available from your centre for the whole of your dog's life. **Please contact the centre directly for help and advice.**

Further information and reading

For free factsheets on dog care, training and behaviour visit www.dogstrust.ie

Recommended books

The following books provide further information on the principles laid out in this leaflet.

General dog care

Haynes Dog Manual: The Definitive Guide to Finding Your Perfect Dog, Training Him and Having a Happy Life Together * – Carolyn Menteith

Dog behaviour

Teach yourself dog* – Heather Simpson – available from www.naturalanimalcentre.com

Dog/human relationships

The Culture Clash ** – Jean Donaldson
Dominance: Fact or fiction? * - Barry Eaton
Coercion and its Fallout ** - Murray Sidman

Training and learning theory

Don't shoot the dog * – Karen Pryor (Clicker training)
Excel-Erated Learning ** – Pamela Reid



Mind games and mental stimulation

Playtime for your dog – keep him busy throughout the day * - Christina Sondermann

Evolution and behaviour

Dogs: A new understanding of Canine Origin, Behaviour and Evolution *** - Raymond Coppinger
The Domestic Dog: Its Evolution, Behaviour and Interactions with People*** - James Serpell

Dogs and children

The Canine Commandments * - Kendal Shepherd

* **easy read**

** **medium level (some scientific concepts)**

*** **harder read with many technical terms (but very good if you can persevere!)**

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www.dogstrust.ie

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