

[Home](#)[Up](#)[x Small Animal 66](#)[Manuscripts](#)[Search](#)

Unruly and Annoying Behaviors in Dogs and Cats

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While some behavior problems can seriously threaten the welfare of the animal or people, many behavior problems are just annoying or upsetting to the owner. Although these behavior problems are not momentous, they can weaken the human-animal bond. They often can be dealt with efficiently during an office exam, therefore creating an opportunity to integrate behavioral therapy into your practice.

Jumping up: Dogs are social animals and often jump up on people when they are greeting them. This behavior may have originated from wolves as they will lick each other on the face in greeting. Although often considered "cute" as a puppy, this behavior can become more annoying as the puppy grows or when the pet has muddy feet. The behavior persists in our pet dogs because people reinforce the behavior by interacting with the dog when it jumps up. To control the behavior, the dog should be given an alternative, acceptable behavior to perform such as sitting during greetings. It is important to remove any rewards for the jumping behavior. People should be advised to turn away if the dog jumps up on them. Then the command for the appropriate behavior can be given and the dog greeted.

Play biting: Puppies use their mouths for social interactions, including play. It is important let a puppy know when that biting hands is not acceptable because a bite, even if given in play, may lead to injury. When a puppy starts to bite at hands, interaction with the puppy should cease. Find an appropriate object for the puppy to mouth and offer this to the puppy. A sharp "yip" emitted by the person at the time of the bite may stop the puppy from biting, allowing the person to withdraw from play for a few minutes. Owners should not engage in forms of play that encourage biting/mouthing of the human. Interactive punishment for play biting in the form of yelling or hitting the puppy should **not** be performed as these methods may serve to make the puppy frightened of people, specifically hands reaching towards the face. If a kitten engages in biting, interaction should cease and then play should be redirected to an appropriate object (e.g. fishing rod type toy).

Pulling: Dogs pulling on their leashes during walks can be very unpleasant for the handler and sometimes can be painful or dangerous. The consequence may be decreased exercise for the dog, often exacerbating other behavioral issues. An accessible and successful tool to manage pulling is the head collar. There are several brands of head collars (Gentle Leader, Halti, Snoot Loop, etc.) and each clinic should investigate and decide which collar works best in their hands. Proper fitting of head collars is important and although not difficult, it does require some attention. Obedience training the dog to heel via positive reinforcement is also advised.

Barking: Barking usually starts between 2-4 weeks of age and persists throughout the life of the dog. Dogs bark for many different reasons including greetings, play, solicitation, herding, defense, distress and alarm. Dogs will use different tones of barks in different situations. If a dog is barking excessively you first need to determine what is the

motivation behind the vocalization and then steps can be taken to control the underlying motivation.

Bark collars work on the premise that they will deliver a form of punishment when barking occurs. Bark collars should not be used on dogs that are engaging in anxiety related barking. The citronella bark collar (Gentle Spray, Premier Pet Products, Richmond, VA) that releases a harmless but disagreeable spray of citronella may be used in conjunction with other treatments for non-anxiety related barking. A study conducted by Moffat and Landsberg evaluated the efficacy of the citronella bark collar on barking in the veterinary hospital setting. Seventy-eight percent of the dogs were controlled or improved in their barking when wearing the collar. Electronic bark collars can be helpful in some non-anxiety related barking situations but should be used with supervision and caution.

Digging: There can be different motivations for digging including regulation of body temperature, play and exploration, hunting, escape behaviors and burying food items. To control unwanted digging, the motivation must be determined and then addressed. Sometimes, especially for those dogs engaged in recreational digging, it can be helpful to provide them with an acceptable digging area. Encourage use of a special area by providing soft, loosely packed dirt and burying things that a dog may like to dig up. Make other unacceptable digging areas unattractive by placing booby-traps such as motion activated sprinklers or rocks in those sites.

Chewing: Chewing is a normal form of exploration and activity for pets. They learn information about their environment when they sniff, taste and chew on objects. Other reasons for chewing behavior include teething (3-6 months of age), attention-seeking behavior (owner gives attention or treats for chewing), anxiety, escape behaviors and obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

When dealing with this problem, you first need to identify the underlying cause for the chewing. If the pet is young and is chewing a variety of objects in the household, puppy/kitten exploration and play/teething are the most likely reasons for the behavior. To correct this problem, you first must provide acceptable objects for the puppy/kitten to chew. Puppies and kittens then need to be supervised so that chewing behavior can be redirected to acceptable objects. If caught in the act of chewing on an unacceptable target, a startling noise (can with some pennies, clap) or a water squirt can be used to interrupt the behavior. The pet should then be encouraged to chew on an appropriate toy. When supervision of the pet is not possible, it should be confined to a safe area. If there are certain objects that are particularly harmful for the puppy or kitten to chew, for example electrical cords, these can also be coated with an unpleasant material such as a bitter apple spray to discourage chewing. Alternatively, home improvement stores sell protective sheaths for electrical cords.

If you determine that the pet only chews on items when an audience is present, the pet may be chewing to get attention. Similar to the jumping up behavior, the pet often gets a reaction, although it is often negative, when it is caught chewing on unacceptable items. Providing this pet with structure and exercise may help with the problem. Also, the owners should be counseled to give the pet attention when it is being well-behaved. However, the owner must also stop giving the pet the "reward" of attention for the unacceptable chewing. Either ignoring the pet or using a remote punishment to interrupt the unwanted chewing should curtail attention-seeking chewing.

When anxiety is the motivation behind the chewing, a trigger for the unacceptable chewing should be identifiable. For example, loud noises or separation from the owner may consistently elicit the chewing behavior. With anxiety related chewing the target item is often something with an owner's scent or may be directed towards exit points. Treatment for anxiety related chewing involves identification of the anxiety provoking stimulus and successful management of that problem.

Some cats will present with the complaint of sucking or ingestion of fabric. Oriental breeds are more likely to present with this complaint, Neville and Bradshaw reported 55% of fabric-eating cats were Siamese and 28% were Burmese in a study of 152 cats with the disorder. There does not appear to be an identifiable nutritional deficiency in these cats, although this should always be investigated. The behavior appears to involve stereotypic oral movements. Over 93% of cats with this disorder started with wool as the target in the Neville and Bradshaw study thus resulting in the name "wool-sucking." However, many of these cats generalized to other fabrics including cotton (64%) and synthetics (54%). Some cats will target non-fabric (i.e. plastic). Sex and reproductive status do not appear to be correlated with incidence of the behavior. The role that early weaning plays in the development of this behavior is not clear. While early weaned kittens appear to be over-represented in this population of fabric-sucking/consumption cats, a causative relationship has not been substantiated in studies. Cats that actually ingest the material are at much greater risk of serious complications, specifically intestinal blockage or owner relinquishment.

Treatment for wool-sucking includes providing a high fiber diet; providing items to chew such as grass, rawhide, microwaved chicken bone; removing target items from the environment, if possible; applying aversive materials to

targets or remote punishment for engaging in behavior; increasing interactive play; identifying and decreasing environmental stressors; and drug therapy for refractory cases. Drugs used to treat wool-sucking include fluoxetine (0.5-1.0 mg/kg PO q 24 hours); clomipramine (0.5 mg/kg q 24 hours); amitriptyline (5-10 mg/cat PO q 12-24 hours) or paroxetine (2.5-5 mg/cat q 24-48 hours).

Coprophagia: Coprophagia, the ingestion of feces, is a form of pica. Some dogs consume their own feces and others eat the feces of other dogs or other species. There are different theories as to why this behavior occurs, including exploratory behavior, establishing intestinal microflora or compensating for a nutritional deficiency. Young dogs are most likely to engage in coprophagia but it can be seen at any age. Puppies will often outgrow the behavior without specific intervention. The behavior is inherently self-rewarding and therefore may become a habit that is difficult to eradicate. A careful history should be collected, focusing on past gastrointestinal disturbances. A medical examination should be performed to rule out any underlying nutritional deficiencies/diseases. Laboratory evaluation should include fecal analysis, CBC, chemistry panel and serum folate, cobalamin, and trypsin -like immunoreactivity. If no medical problems are discovered then a behavioral treatment approach can be implemented. Consider changing diet to alter the characteristics of the stool. Addition of monosodium glutamate (Adolph's meat tenderizer, Forbid) to the food can make the feces less attractive. Ensure that the animal has plenty of outlets for exercise and play. Finally, denying access to feces is usually the most successful treatment plan.

Eating house plants: Ingestion of plant material may be associated with play and exploration or may satisfy some nutritional craving for fiber. A complete physical exam, including oral exam should be performed to rule out any underlying problems. Since many houseplants are toxic if ingested, this can be a serious problem. The treatment includes removing plants from pet's access, providing the pet with safe plants to consume (e.g. grass); providing daily interactive play time with appropriate toys; and remote punishment for chewing on unacceptable plants (e.g. motion detectors, water squirt).

Scratching: Cats tend to inflict the most property damage by scratching. In a survey of cats not presenting for behavioral problems, owners reported 60% of the cats scratched furniture. Scratching is a normal behavior that serves a variety of purposes including scent marking, visual marking, stretching of muscles and grooming of claws. In studies of free-living cats it was noted that scratching behavior increased when other cats were present as compared to when the cat was alone. The social implications of scratching should be explored if scratching is a problem. Cats may have a preference for material and orientation for scratching. A study by Hart and Hart identified fabrics with a longitudinally oriented thread were preferred over tightly woven knobby fabric for scratching. Some cats prefer to scratch on horizontal surfaces while others like vertical surfaces. Observing individual cats will identify their personal preferences. Cats often target prominent locations for scratching and areas near their resting spots. Cats must be given and taught appropriate places to engage in this behavior.

If a cat is scratching inappropriate items, it should be provided appropriate sturdy scratching posts in prominent locations (near areas of rest or previously scratched targets). Proper use of post should be praised. Encouragement to scratch on the post may be aided by placing treats on the post, playing with toys near/on the post or placing catnip on the post. A well worn/used post should be retained instead of replaced.

Inappropriate scratching surfaces should be made unavailable or aversive (e.g. double stick tape, foil). Placing a bell on cat's collar to track cat's location in house and scratching activity can help with the appropriate delivery of remote punishment (water squirt) for scratching behavior. Remote punishment is often unsuccessful at curtailing this problem since owners are often inconsistent with its delivery. Nails should be trimmed regularly as this may decrease the damage inflicted upon targets. Soft Paws are another treatment option; these pliable nail caps are glued onto the nail and prevent destruction. Finally, onychectomy (declaw surgery) is a treatment option. The practice of declawing is controversial and in some countries is illegal. Declawing involves amputation of the third phalanx. It is an invasive surgical procedure that may have complications associated with the procedure. That said, most cats that undergo the procedure have no obvious long-term negative effects. Appropriate surgical technique and pain medications can minimize complications.

There have been unsupported claims about the consequences of declawing that include an increase in biting behavior, an increase in house-soiling problems, resolution of predatory behavior. Studies do not support these myths.

Conclusion: Addressing the concerns of pet owners regarding these annoying but manageable behavioral issues can greatly improve the human-animal bond. It also may bond an owner to your practice, when they realize that you care about their pet's welfare, well-being and behavioral health.

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