

## ***When to Refer to a Veterinary Behaviorist***

Veterinary behavior is a fairly new specialty. There are still plenty of old wives' tales and just plain old bad advice out there. As a veterinarian or veterinary professional, you likely didn't get much schooling in behavior medicine so it can be daunting to deal with a behavior case in general practice. In spite of how challenging you may find it, behavior is an integral part of your patients' welfare. It's important to know how to approach behavior cases and how to get your clients the help they need.

First and foremost, it's important to acknowledge the owner's concerns. If they're bringing it up, it's worth discussing. Normalizing their concerns is incredibly important. Our families with troubled pets feel alone, they have no help, and they don't know what to do. Remember: you don't have to know all the answers, you just need to know where to get them. WE have your answers, please use us as a resource.



Get a thorough behavioral history and at least help them devise a management strategy. Management is the process of manipulating the environment in order to prevent the target behavior from occurring at all. Below are some examples:

- Cat urinates in laundry basket.
  - Close the laundry room door
  - Put laundry right away after folding
  - Keep the cat confined to a specific room
- Dog bites visitors
  - Put the dog in another room when people come over.
  - Keep the dog on leash when people are over.
  - Don't have visitors to the house

Management will not fix the problem, we're just keeping everyone safe (in the case of aggression) and preventing the repetition of the problem behavior. The more they do it, the easier it becomes, the harder it is to change. This is just a quick bandage until we can put together a more thorough plan.

The next question is: who should you refer to? A trainer or a veterinary behaviorist? I want to emphasize that the animal training field is largely unregulated. Anyone can pick up a leash and call themselves a dog trainer. Make sure you know who you're referring your clients to. At the end of this article is a list of trainers that we work with and trust to work with our patients. The easiest way to tell if they should go to a trainer versus our term is whether there is a component of fear or aggression. These are emotions not training problems. A good trainer can make huge strides with a fearful dog, but they will likely need medical intervention at some point. Below are the most common reasons to refer:

- There's aggression.
  - There's the saying "any dog can bite," while true, the bite is usually appropriate to the context. If a dog bites because his foot is stuck in the car door, that's appropriate. If he's biting because someone walked in the room, that's not. That dog needs help.

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### **Animal Behavior Wellness Center**

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- They have tried training already.
  - We see plenty of animals that are incredibly well trained, but still have behavior problems. If you have a client who has been using training for 6-8 weeks and not seeing enough or any progress, send them our way.
- It's a baby
  - Puppies and kittens less than 6 months that are experiencing fear, panic, excessive activity, destruction, and (especially) aggression need to be seen as soon as possible. They will not outgrow these problems. The sooner we can help them, the more normal their lives will be. Do NOT wait. We can help even if they're only 8 weeks old. Fear is not normal in young animals.



- They're considering euthanasia
  - Our practice has seen SO many animals that people recommended euthanizing. We can make huge strides with pretty much any pet. It is never our place to tell the family they need to euthanize their pet, but we can put it in perspective and help guide them through the decision. If they want to treat, we will put together a realistic plan. If they truly want to euthanize, at least they know their options. We never guilt families who decide to euthanize, we are simply here to guide them.

- They want the “Cadillac”
  - Plenty of clients just want to seek the best for their pet. Some people just like the peace of mind that comes with seeing a specialist.
- You’re just not sure.
  - If ever in doubt, refer to us! We can help any companion animal that is struggling. We’ll put together a comprehensive plan that will address their environment, management, behavior modification, and medical.

We have a lot of assessment options for your clients as well. We understand that treating behavior problems can be financially taxing. We have the option of seeing them for a full consult, we can perform a telephone consultation, or we can simply guide you on their treatment. If you ever have a case that you want to discuss, please feel free to do so. One of our most important responsibilities is to provide support for our general practitioners. We will never turn away someone asking for help.

As a general practitioner, you are fantastic at keeping away the normal aches and pains. Sometimes though, you’re presented with a pet and you really aren’t sure in what direction to go. That’s why the Animal Behavior Wellness Center is here to help you and your clients work through their behavior concerns together.

