

# Speaking Dog or Cat: Animal Behavior and a Safe, Forever Home

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People give up their pets. Sometimes because they never meant to get them in the first place. Or the kids grew up. Or they had kittens or puppies they never intended. In fact, stated reasons for surrender to animal shelters aren't very reliable. It's not an allergy, or the cost of pet food, or the kids growing up, but more often behavior problems, which can force a family to that last resort of giving up their pet. It's heartbreaking.

Every year, thousands of animals are surrendered to shelters across the country. And behavior problems are the number one reason good animals leave good homes. As a vet, I see at least two or three behavior appointments a week. The dog that chews the door frame when left alone or shakes uncontrollably during a thunderstorm or, heaven forbid, growls at the kids. Or the cat that doesn't quite make it to the litterbox (or anywhere near it) or bullies another cat or even bites the hand that feeds him.

From aggression to separation anxiety to inappropriate urination, these are all issues that can be urgent by themselves because of what they do to a home. But they are equally serious because they usually mean something is wrong for the animal. For dogs, problems can be very dramatic – plaster wrenched off the wall, door frames chewed. Just go see “Marley and Me” to see what a strong dog can do to a sturdy home.

And then there are the aggression cases, and these can be very difficult, but not impossible, to modify.

For cats, problems are a little different. While your cat may not be as destructive as the home-alone Australian shepherd, “bathroom” problems may be just as serious. Although you should consult your vet about these, they are nearly always behavioral. Too many cats in the house, a stray tabby in the yard, not enough litter boxes or even the wrong litter! Cats, mysteries they so often are, may be stressed about something entirely indecipherable to us. Your vet or a behaviorist may be able to help.

When I started my practice two decades ago, behavior was a new field. People joked about it saying their pet was going to a “dog shrink” or their cat was seeing a “psychotherapist.” Believe me, animal behavior work is nothing like psychotherapy. While we use medications you may have in your own medicine cabinet, we're just beginning to learn how these drugs may help our dogs and cats. And it's often trial and error. The key is using them in conjunction with a sound training or conditioning plan.

Behavior problems are often the most difficult ones to diagnose. I dread that 7 p.m. appointment for the dog that's tearing up the house when left alone or the cat with litter box issues. Because identifying exactly what the problem is can be difficult and time-consuming. Certainly impossible to do in the 20 minutes I have to make a diagnosis and devise a treatment plan for that family. That's why there are professionals whose practices are specifically devoted to behavior. They may be certified pet dog trainers, or animal behaviorists or board-certified behavioral veterinarians. We're very lucky that there are many of these wonderful professionals in our area. Start with your vet, and get a referral if needed.

If you don't need professional help or medication, great. But first know your pet's needs. If you have a young lab, tire him out. And if you have a border collie, heaven help you, because you need to give these intelligent, motivated dogs a real job to do. Second, decrease your own stress because animals pick up on it. And third, start enrichment exercises and toys that will stimulate your dog or cat and give her the confidence to be less anxious. For dogs, these exercises include training the "big four"—sit, stay, come, heel. Finally, dogs chew, so if you don't want him to eat the Karastan in the living room, give him stuffed Kongs and something safe to chew on when you're not home. And by all means, use a large crate if you can't be sure he (and your home) will be safe when you're not there. Incidentally, eight hours left alone while you're at the office doesn't work. You have to get a midday walk in there.

So, let's get back to that ripped up doorframe. Dogs get bored. We all do. And, like us, they also get stressed.

Destruction can be due to anxiety, and anxiety can be compounded by lack of exercise. See how it works? In general, a tired dog is a good dog. All of us at Lincoln Park know this. That's the whole point of standing out there in the wind at 26 degrees on a Sunday morning.

Learn to watch and listen and really understand what your dog or cat is communicating. More often than not, there's a reason for your pet's behavior. Believe me, it's not trying to punish you or get even because you left it alone. There's simply some unmet need it's responding to. As responsible caretakers, it's up to us to provide for those needs. And if we can't decipher them on our own, give the attention and training, exercise and space our animals need, there are professionals we can turn to for help.



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