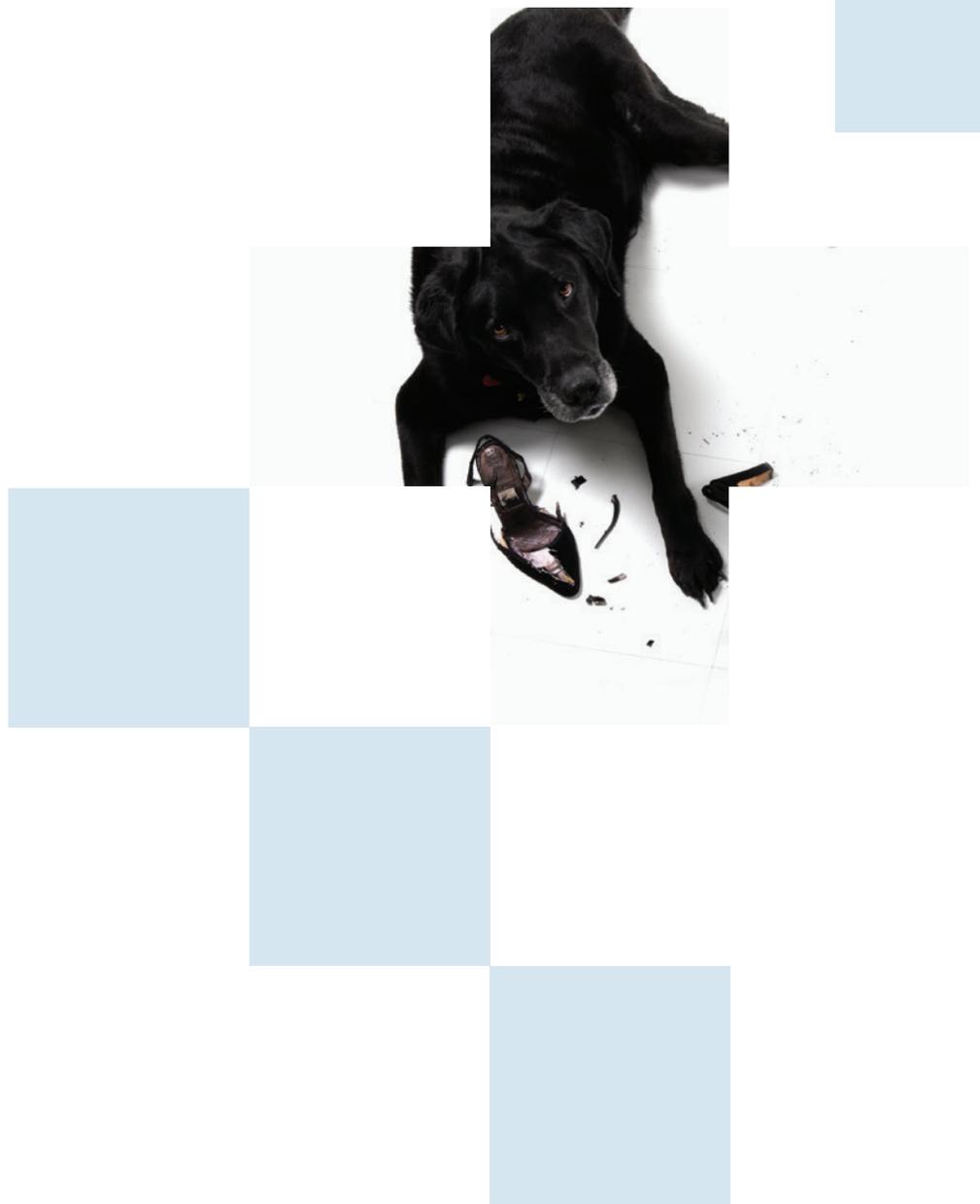


General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Pet behaviour issues





Pet behaviour issues

What is a behavioural problem?

A pet has a behavioural problem when it behaves in a way which is inappropriate or unsociable. Such problems range from the annoying e.g. pulling on the lead, jumping up at guests or the destruction of property, to the really serious, such as aggression towards people or other animals. Behavioural problems are a very common reason for the re-homing of pets and in some instances can even lead to the euthanasia of a pet. They can develop and be reinforced very easily, at which point they can become very challenging to treat.

Prevention is always better than cure, and you should take steps to reduce the possibility of problems starting. Before you get a pet you need to make sure that you are going to be able to look after it properly. All pets, especially dogs, take a lot of time and attention. You need to be sure that you are going to be able to offer the appropriate lifestyle for your pet. For example, if you work full time and live in a flat, most dogs will get bored and stressed, causing behavioural problems to develop. Some animals need more exercise than others – for example Border Collies are built to run around for hours on end working, so it is little wonder they can become obsessive and stressed when they are offered only two short lead walks per day.

Early socialisation is important to reduce the potential for behavioural problems developing.

What is socialisation?

Socialisation is the early introduction of your dog to new environments, events and objects.

Puppies are most receptive to new experiences during the first 14 weeks. The more novel experiences they have at this time, the better it is for their confidence and ability to cope in the future. For much of this important time a puppy will be with its mother and litter-mates. For this reason, seeing the home and environment from which your new puppy has come is important. For socialisation purposes, having different people and children around creates a good environment for a puppy to start in, rather than in a kennel block away from regular, friendly human contact. Whilst we want our dogs to be well socialised with other dogs and environments, this must be balanced with the fact that puppies are at risk from infection before the vaccination programme is complete (See [Vaccination section](#)).

As soon as initial vaccination is complete, puppies should go to as many new places as possible and meet other dogs and also children. All new experiences should be made fun and positive, with plenty of treats and encouragement. Making regular visits to the vets' for a biscuit and cuddle with the nursing or reception staff is a great way of getting you puppy used to your veterinary practice.

Socialisation should continue through life, and although the early period is very important, it is never too late for a dog to learn.

Why bother with training?

Training is important for all dogs, whether as a structured programme or, if the owner is experienced, at home.

The most important function of training classes, especially for puppies, is socialisation. The early experience of meeting lots of other fun puppies in a safe environment is invaluable. Training is also important for your dog to learn what is expected of him or her, both within a family and also the wider community. It is extremely important for your dog's safety and your long term enjoyment of your dog that basic commands are understood and followed. Good recall, sitting and waiting when commanded are the most important.

Training classes vary a great deal. It is important to find a class which you enjoy and that works for you and your dog. Some people prefer strict formal lessons (think Barbara Woodhouse!) and others are more comfortable with a behavioural approach such as clicker training. It is sensible to check out a number of classes before enrolling – it would be a shame if your puppy were to miss out because you didn't get on with the trainer or his/her methods.

When do I start?

It is never too early or late to start training. You can start training in basics as soon as you take your puppy or new dog home.

How do I start?

Moving into a new home with a brand new family is a pretty scary experience. You will need to reassure your puppy by providing a safe comfortable environment. He should have a special place of his own – either a bed or ideally a crate/cage. Cage training might feel a bit mean initially, but you should think of it as the puppy's own safe room. All the comforts should be here – a comfortable bed, food and water bowls and a favourite toy. Children should be taught that the puppy should not be disturbed when he is in his cage. It is best not to use the cage as a punishment for bad behaviour, as this will lead to negative connotations. The puppy will be safe at night in this cage and will not be able to damage property. The cage also helps with toilet training.

For the first few nights your puppy may be lonely and cry at night. It is natural to feel sorry for him and try to console him. Unfortunately, any interaction with your puppy after he has cried will reward him for the behaviour and he will learn that crying brings his owner, and so he will continue to do this. By ignoring him, he will learn pretty quickly that no one comes when he makes a fuss and so learn to sleep through the night. You may have a few disturbed nights initially, but it is worth it in the long run. For the first few nights you could leave the radio on quietly and provide warmth with a warm hot water bottle (not hot, and well protected by towels).

How do I toilet train my puppy?

Some puppies learn very quickly about toilet training whilst others can be a bit slower, so be patient. Toilet training should be achieved with lots of positive reinforcement i.e. lots of treats and praise when the puppy urinates or defecates where you have asked him to. It is a good idea to have a signal word or phrase such as 'be quick' to encourage the puppy to go to the toilet (choose something the whole family are comfortable using and which is not too embarrassing in front of the neighbours!).

When puppies are little, they need to be actively taken outside very regularly. Any activity such as eating, drinking, playing or waking up will be followed by urination and/or defecation, so the puppy should be taken out after any such event, as well as numerous times in between. Just leaving the door open is not good enough – puppies need to be taken out, encouraged and praised.

We do not recommend negative reinforcement – shouting at your puppy and 'rubbing his nose in it' is very distressing and unnecessary. If you catch your dog going in the wrong place firmly say 'no', then take him to the appropriate place and use the usual command with lots of affection and encouragement. If your puppy has an accident it probably means you have not taken him out recently enough. Using paper training as an intermediate stage is not recommended, as it only confuses the issue.

My puppy is biting when we are playing, how can I stop this?

All puppies play-fight and bite. This is play, but they are also testing their strength and what they can get away with. Biting and mouthing during play should not be allowed as eventually it may do harm. If your puppy is playing in an inappropriate manner say 'no', push him away, stand up and then ignore him for a while. He will soon learn that play stops when he bites and so the behaviour will stop. Negative reinforcement, such as smacking on the nose, has no effect and is more likely to perpetuate the behaviour with a bitten hand!

My dog is chewing things, how can I stop this?

All puppies chew – it is normal investigative behaviour for a puppy. It also can provide comfort especially if the puppy is teething.

Make sure your puppy has plenty of appropriate things to chew. Toys must be safe for dogs to chew on – children's toys are not designed for puppies and parts may get stuck in the tummy if swallowed. 'Kongs' are ideal toys for dogs. Make sure you buy one appropriate to the size of your dog.

Make sure you don't leave shoes and enticing things lying around, or the temptation may be too much! When you have to leave your puppy for periods of time, putting him safely in the cage will prevent damage to property. If you are careful when your puppy is young, hopefully a habit will not form and you will be less likely to have problems later on. Puppies will tend to chew when they are bored or seeking attention, so giving your puppy plenty of exercise and stimulation should reduce his desire to be destructive.

How will my dog know its place in the family?

Your dog will consider your family as its pack. It is important for the safety of your family and the happiness of your dog that he knows where he stands in the pack.

Simple rules, if followed by the whole family, will reduce your dog's expectations and lead to a happier relationship. Sitting before being told he is allowed to eat is a good example. It is a good idea for dogs to be kept off the furniture and downstairs – these are good physical distinctions between human and dog.

As much as we may adore our dogs, it is best to resist the temptation to mother them too much – a dog is not a toy or a baby. Dogs are much happier when treated like dogs!

My dog is scared of fireworks, what can I do to help?

Many dogs are scared by loud noises, so the period around Guy Fawkes' night can be a stressful time for many dogs. On the night it is important to reduce your dog's exposure by ensuring he is safely

inside before dark. Putting on the TV or radio helps to dull down the noise whilst drawing the curtains and putting the lights on bright reduces the effect of flashes. If your dog hides away, it is sensible to allow this and make his chosen place comfortable for him. Try draping a duvet over a table and putting his bed, water bowl and toys under there too. Try not to comfort your dog otherwise, to him, this will reinforce the idea that his anxious behaviour is appropriate. Instead, it is best to remain calm and go about your normal activities.

Certain therapies are available which can really help to reduce anxiety at this time of year. These range from plug-in pheromone devices which provide a calming environment, to herbal remedies, natural calming proteins and prescription medications which help the dog to cope. Please discuss with your veterinary surgeon which of these options might be most appropriate for your pet. Many of these therapies work best when started in advance, so make sure you consult your vet well ahead of festivities. It is while dogs are on these therapies that behavioural modification can be used most effectively to reduce anxiety caused by noises. CDs which simulate various alarming noises can be obtained from Willows. If you start by playing these very quietly to your dog and simultaneously providing positive stimuli such as feeding, it may be possible to desensitise him to such noises. This takes time and patience but it can be very rewarding.

Such CDs are also of use in early socialisation to prevent noise phobias developing in the first place. Having the CD on quietly during a puppy's playing and feeding and then slowly increasing the volume will help him to get used to such noises from an early age.

What if a problem has already developed?

If your dog is exhibiting inappropriate behaviour, it is important to seek advice as soon as possible. Pet behaviour can be rather complex and owners frequently reinforce bad behaviour inadvertently, thus perpetuating the problem. If you have any concerns, please speak to your veterinary surgeon who will be happy to give advice where appropriate, and also to examine your dog to make sure there is no physical reason for the behaviour. More complicated behavioural issues may require referral to a behavioural specialist.

What are animal behavioural counsellors? Are they all the same?

There are many people who offer advice and who claim to be 'behaviouralists' or trainers. However, there is no legal requirement for certification or qualification. Inappropriate advice can be damaging, so be careful who you entrust your dog to. We strongly recommend that advice is sought from a fully qualified behavioural counsellor who is recognised by the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC – see link at the end of this information sheet). Should you start to experience problems with your pet, please contact your veterinary surgeon as soon as possible. There may be a physical

problem which needs addressing. There are many problems that your veterinary surgeon may be able to deal with directly or if the problem is more serious or complex your vet can refer you to a qualified and recognised behavioural counsellor.

Are behavioural consultations covered by insurance?

Some insurance policies will cover behavioural consultations and treatments where a veterinary referral has taken place. However, all policies differ and it is worth checking with your insurance company first if cost is an issue.

Will neutering help?

There are many reasons for neutering your pet and these are discussed in our neutering information sheets. There are some inappropriate behaviours which will be helped by neutering your pet. However, the neutering of male dogs (castration) is not an alternative to proper training, and this should be discussed with your veterinary surgeon.

Is my dog dangerous?

Any aggression towards people or other dogs should be treated extremely seriously. If you think your dog is showing any aggressive tendencies you must speak to your veterinary surgeon and possibly take the dog for referral to a behavioural counsellor.

You are legally responsible for the actions of your dog. There have been several high profile cases recently where criminal convictions have followed dog attacks. It is extremely important that you understand your responsibilities. See the end of this information sheet for the UK Government website links which give information on such issues.

The most common victims of dog bites are young children, the average age being 5 years old. You should never leave a child alone with a dog, even if the dog has always appeared trustworthy. One of the main problems is the inability of children to understand canine body language. A DVD called 'The Blue Dog' is available which can help children to understand the body language of dogs and how to interact with dogs safely.

My rescue dog shows behavioural problems, can he be helped?

Taking on a rescue dog can be a very rewarding experience but many rescue dogs will come with their own 'emotional baggage'. Indeed, behavioural problems may well be the reason for the dog being re-homed in the first place. It is important that you anticipate the fact that problems may arise and that you discuss any problems the dog may have with the rescue centre before you take him or her

home. You need to be sure that you are going to be able to offer an appropriate environment and lifestyle for that particular dog.

Please contact your veterinary surgeon at an early stage if inappropriate behaviour occurs after you have taken on a rescue pet. It is best to tackle problems early before they become reinforced and more difficult to treat.

As discussed above, many behavioural problems stem from poor socialisation in early life. Although you cannot recreate that early learning period, older dogs can be socialised to new surroundings, people and events – you can teach an old dog new tricks!

Can cats have behavioural problems?

Cats can also display behavioural problems although they are recognised and discussed less often. This may be because cats are smaller and therefore pose less of a threat to humans, and also because they interact with their owners in a different way to dogs. Should you have any concerns about your cat's behaviour, please discuss this with your veterinary surgeon. Referral to a behavioural counsellor is also available for cats where appropriate.

Common causes of behavioural problems in cats relate to stress. Certain situations will commonly cause stress – for example, cats which are kept indoors all the time frequently show signs of stress as this restricts their normal activities and behaviour. Even 'posh' pedigree cats which have never experienced the great outdoors may be stressed by enforced confinement.

Some cats in multi-cat households will also exhibit signs of stress. In the wild, cats are solitary animals, so sharing territory with other animals can be a very stressful experience for them, particularly where there is competition for resources such as food bowls, litter trays and resting places.

Cats may show that they are stressed by exhibiting inappropriate behaviours, such as fear, aggression or marking (spraying urine). Medical conditions such as hair pulling, colitis and cystitis are also seen when cats get stressed.

Can rabbits have behavioural problems?

Rabbits certainly can display behaviours which are unacceptable to their owners. They are also very prone to stress. Please discuss with your veterinary surgeon should you have any concerns about your rabbits behaviour or welfare. You may also find our rabbit information sheets of assistance.

Where can I get further information?

Behavioural problems can be difficult to diagnose and treat. There

is a lot of information available which can be helpful, but care must be taken as your pet's motivation for certain behaviours may not always be obvious to the non-specialist, and certain treatments may only be appropriate when instructed by a recognised behavioural counsellor. You may pick up some good tips for certain problems from TV shows, for example, which feature behavioural counsellors, but again, care must be taken in following their suggestions, especially if any negative or aversion techniques are recommended.

The following websites may offer useful advice but please do contact your veterinary surgeon should you have any training or behavioural problems with your pet.

Behavioural counsellors to whom we refer patients

www.petbehaviourcentre.com

www.dogways.co.uk/about.htm

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors

www.apbc.org.uk

Rehoming advice

www.dogstrust.org.uk/

Rabbit advice

www.houserabbit.co.uk/resources/index.php?section=leaflets.html

Animal welfare, dangerous dogs and the law

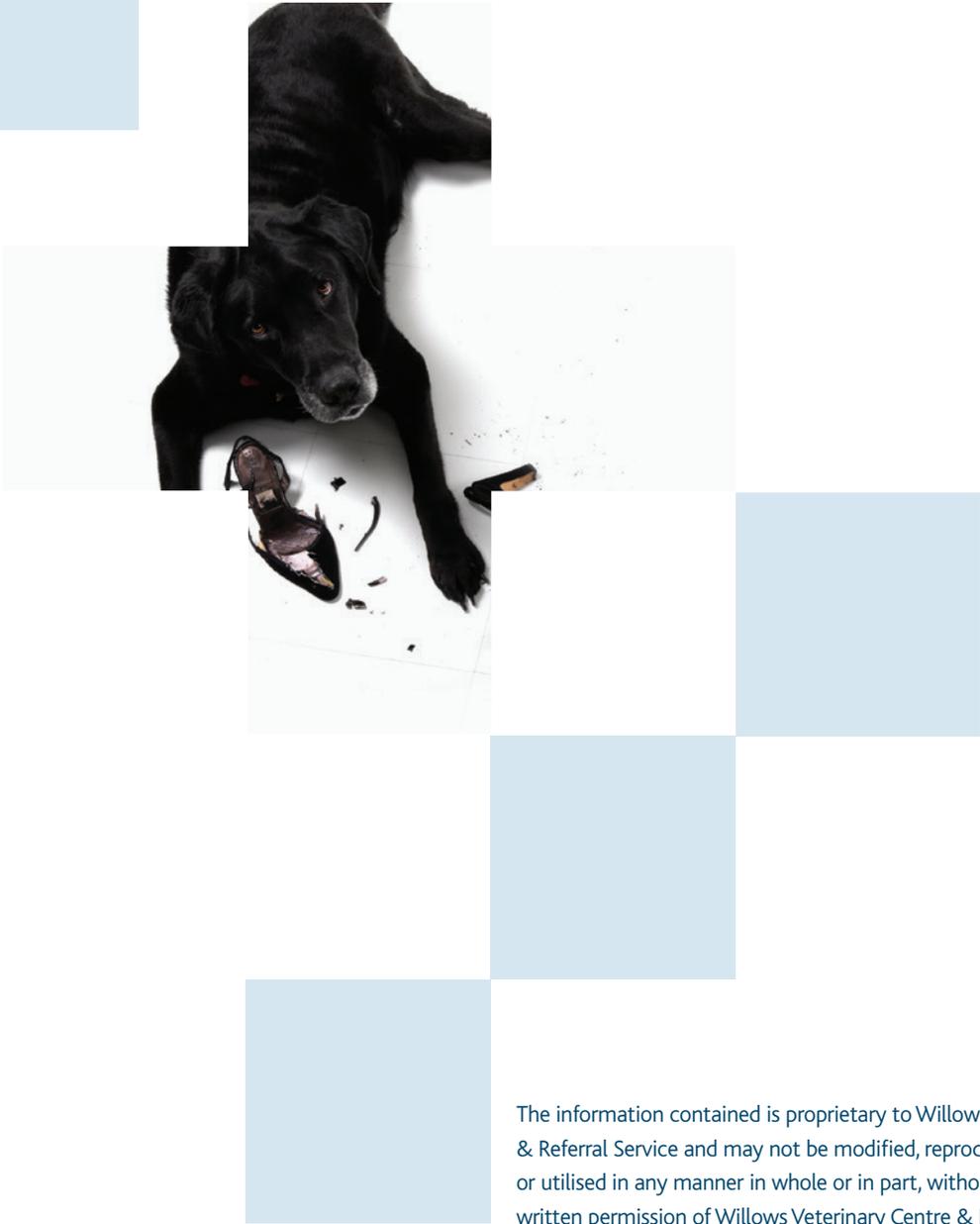
www.gov.uk/animal-welfare-legislation-protecting-pets

www.gov.uk/control-dog-public

Cats

www.fabcats.org/behaviour/index.php

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