



Pediatric Behavior Problems—Dogs

Basics

OVERVIEW

- For the most part, these problems include behaviors that are normal and common to most puppies, but they are not acceptable to the family
- The undesirable behaviors require some degree of modification by training and “shaping” to become acceptable; “shaping” is a behavioral technique that gradually directs the puppy to the desired behavior—the puppy is rewarded for a response that is similar to the desired behavior in a stepwise fashion, until the desired behavior is accomplished
- Training problems include destructive chewing, playbiting, jumping on people, and getting on counters or furniture

GENETICS

- Activity levels and behaviors of young puppies are likely to be similar to those of their parents
- Some problem behaviors may be more common in certain breeds (such as unruly, activity-related problems in working-breed dogs and digging by terriers)

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

Species

- Dogs

Breed Predispositions

- Working breeds selected for high energy levels

Mean Age and Range

- Four- to nine-months of age, but may persist until late in the second year

Predominant Sex

- Somewhat increased frequency and intensity in male dogs

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

Destructive Chewing

- The pet chews and damages family members' furniture and possessions; initially occurs in the presence of family members but may become limited to owner-absent periods once the pet has been caught and punished several times

Playbiting

- The pet bites hands, legs, and/or clothing; bites usually are inhibited but can cause injuries owing to sharp deciduous (“baby”) teeth
- Growling and barking may be present, but it usually has a tone with a higher pitch than that associated with more serious types of aggression (such as fear or possessive aggression)
- Play attacks usually are triggered by some movement by a family member but can be very spontaneous without apparent provocation or stimulus

Jumping on People

- The pet jumps up against and places paws against family members and/or visitors; typically occurs during greetings and when the pet is excited but may occur when the pet wants attention or something the person is holding

Getting on Counters/Furniture

- The pet gets on furniture and counters to explore and access objects to chew or eat
- The pet also may jump on furniture during play, to get attention, or to rest

CAUSES

General

- Inadequate owner control, management, supervision, training, exercise, and/or mental stimulation can be underlying causes of these behavior problems

Destructive Chewing

- Teething
- Play
- Exploratory behavior
- Escape behavior
- Insufficient or uninteresting toys
- Confinement intolerance, trying to escape
- Hunger, food spilled on carpeting or furniture
- Predation (for example, mice or other small mammals in the walls or flooring)

Playbiting

- Rough play, teasing, and encouraging the pet to bite hands and feet

Jumping on People

- Long confinement periods, especially in a very small enclosure
- Excited greetings by family members and visitors
- Rough play
- Insufficient opportunities for social interaction
- Insufficient training

Getting on Counters/Furniture

- Insufficient or uninteresting toys
- Tempting objects or food left on counters or furniture
- Desire for social interaction
- No comfortable surface on the floor on which to rest

Treatment

HEALTH CARE

- Outpatient
- Formal obedience training with an experienced trainer may be beneficial

ACTIVITY

- Provide as much vigorous exercise as possible that is within acceptable health parameters for the individual puppy

- “Fetch/Drop it” is an excellent game for providing exercise and reminding the pet that the owner has control of resources (for example, toys and food); it also will help family members retrieve objects from the pet that it should not have—using two objects, throwing one and holding the other to throw once the pet returns with the first object can help keep the game going in puppies that may not drop the toy

DIET

- Feed enough food at optimum times to keep the pet satisfied, in order to decrease its motivation to get on counters, get into trash, guard food, or chew on inanimate objects
- Use of a food-dispensing-type toy may occupy the puppy and be used in addition to chew toys
- Your pet's veterinarian will make recommendations on diet and amount to feed; food requirements can vary considerably from puppy to puppy

Medications

Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive

- Drugs generally are not indicated
- On rare occasions, a small dose of a phenothiazine tranquilizer (such as acepromazine) or an antihistamine (such as diphenhydramine) might be considered for mild sedation when friends visit and the pet is not yet under control

Follow-Up Care

PATIENT MONITORING

- Follow-up appointments must be determined on a case-by-case consideration
- Phone call follow-ups at approximately 10 days, 20 days, and 6 weeks following the initial visit are usually helpful
- A trained veterinary support staff member can play an important role in helping with follow-up calls

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Provide an adequate amount of supervision and confinement
- Begin food-lure-reward obedience training in the home at 7–8 weeks of age; enroll in a puppy class at 8–10 weeks of age
- Provide large amounts of physical exercise and mental stimulation
- The veterinary staff will provide information about normal young pet behavior and needs (especially mental and physical stimulation) during various growth phases, so the family knows what to expect and what to do
- Provide safe and interesting toys

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Damaged household objects and clothing
- The family's food is eaten by the pet
- Intestinal foreign bodies and blockages or obstructions
- Minor skin injuries to the person from playbites
- A guest is knocked down and injured
- A weakened bond with the pet and possible relinquishment to an animal shelter

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Prognosis is generally good; the frequency and intensity of the behaviors will decrease with age
- Jumping up on people and playbiting usually can be controlled quickly, if the family is consistent with training
- The tendency to chew occasionally on the family's possessions or explore counters for food and other objects may last until 12–24 months of age, when the pet becomes behaviorally mature and less active

Key Points

GENERAL

- Use of rewards and punishment, including timing, consistency, value, and intensity; harsh or physical punishment should be avoided—never strike the pet, thump its nose, shake it by the scruff, roll it on its back, or squeeze the lips against its teeth in an attempt to stop mouthing or biting—these approaches may increase the severity of the problem, ruin the bond with the pet, and lead to more serious problems, such as fear and aggression
- Family members should look constantly for and reward acceptable behaviors
- Teach the pet to sit on command by using food-lure training
- Discuss proper supervision of your puppy and confinement and how to train your puppy to accept it with your pet's veterinarian

DESTRUCTIVE CHEWING

- Provide interesting toys; experiment with different types of toys to find types the pet prefers
- Offer toys in which small amounts of food can be wedged or hidden to make them more attractive
- Reward acceptable chewing with praise and by tossing treats to the pet when it chews appropriate toys
- Keep forbidden objects out of reach
- Close doors and use baby gates to restrict access to objects of interest to the puppy
- Spray objects that need to be protected with safe, aversive-tasting substances (prior to use, spray a small area as a test to ensure that spray will not damage the object [for example, to check fabric for colorfastness])
- Use a motion-activated alarm to keep the pet away from objects that need to be protected
- Interrupt any unacceptable chewing with a sharp “No,” the noise of a shake can (a can with a few pennies in it that makes noise when shaken), the “hiss” from a can of compressed air, or an air horn—any of these interruptive methods should be used with some attention to the pet's temperament; they should be minimal in intensity so that the behavior stops immediately, but a fear response is not elicited from the pet
- Close supervision or safe confinement of the pet may be necessary for up to 2 years of age

PLAYBITING

- Provide plenty of exercise to reduce reactivity and impulsivity
- Have toys available at all times to toss and distract the pet; use toys in which small amounts of food can be wedged or hidden to divert the pet's attention and keep it occupied
- Place the pet in time-out or leave the puppy's presence when it is out of control and the family cannot devote the time needed to “shape” the behavior or wear the pet out with exercise
- Avoid games that encourage playbiting hands or feet
- Take control of the pet by controlling resources (for example, toys and food) and making it sit before receiving toys, food, play, and attention
- Ignore any pushy social behavior by the puppy (such as whining, barking, or pawing for attention)
- Say “Ouch” very loudly and walk away from the pet to immediately interrupt any hard bites during play
- Physical corrections should be avoided because they can cause fear, anxiety, and aggression
- Use a leash and head halter (such as Gentle Leader or Halti) as needed for more control
- The puppy should be enrolled in puppy classes as early as possible (8–10 weeks of age)

JUMPING ON PEOPLE

- Avoid play and games that encourage the pet to jump up on people
- Teach the puppy to sit on command
- Every time the puppy approaches a person for attention or to greet someone, quickly place a small treat or toy in front of its mouth and ask it to sit
- If possible, completely ignore the puppy when it is jumping up
- If the puppy jumps up, the behavior can be interrupted with a sharp noise (as previously described in “Destructive Chewing”) or a head halter can be used to increase control and prevent jumping
- All family members *must* be very consistent in responding to this problem and shaping the pet's behavior; ensure that no one is encouraging the behavior

GETTING ON COUNTERS/FURNITURE

- Keep food and interesting objects off counters and furniture during the early training period
- Constantly supervise the puppy or place the pet in a safe confinement area
- Provide interesting toys for mental stimulation and to keep the puppy focused on objects on the floor
- Keep the puppy well fed so it is not hungry and, therefore, will be less likely to look for food on counters or tables
- Use motion-activated alarms or air canisters to teach the puppy to stay off furniture and counters when unsupervised
- Provide a doggy bed on the floor

Notes

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