

Preventing Behavior Problems
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Behavior problems are always easier to prevent than to resolve. If we knew specifically what factors predict that problems are likely to occur, we could do a better job at preventing them. There has been little research done in this area, and we don't have any clear cut connections such as exist between smoking and cancer for example, that would tell us a problem is likely to develop. However, we can make use of experience and the little research that has been done to make pet owners aware of some red flags or early behavioral warning signs that a problem could be in the making.

First, there are lifestyle changes we know put pets at risk for problems. Separation anxiety problems for example, are likely to occur after a move, after a dog has been boarded and returns home, or after a change in the family's schedule. For example, if one or more family members have been home for an extended time period due to illness, vacation, or job layoffs and then goes back to work full-time, the dog may be at risk for separation anxiety. In families with children, a risky time is when the child begins crawling. Once the child is more mobile, it is more difficult for the pet, especially dogs, to avoid the child. Defensive behavior can result.

Litterbox problems are the most common problem seen in cats, and one study identified differences between cats with problems and those without. Cats with litterbox problems were more likely to have a history of urinary tract problems, to have scented rather than unscented litter provided for them, and were less likely to cover their waste after eliminating. While it can't be concluded from this information that there is a cause and effect relationship between these factors and elimination problems, there does seem to be a correlation. Another study found that puppies who developed a serious illness were more likely to display dominance-type aggression, aggression towards and fear of strangers, fear of children and separation anxiety than healthy puppies.

Finally, pets will sometimes display behaviors that owners either ignore or do not understand the significance of, which are 'red flags' for problems to come. In our behavior consultations, we always ask owners if they can take their dog's food away. Some people respond that they don't think it's right to take the food away, while others say their dog has growled at them, but they considered that to be normal. While protecting food may be normal, it is never acceptable for a dog to growl when an owner attempts to take away food or water, or approach the dog when he is eating. In one recent case, the dog's growling escalated a few months later to a bite to the owner's arm. Early warning signs such as this should never be ignored, because they often progress into bigger problems.

If we knew more about what factors contribute to behavior problems, we could be more proactive in developing behavior wellness programs for pets. This approach could have the potential to save the lives of many animals who are surrendered to shelters because of a problem that could have either been prevented or resolved.