

Be Proactive to Prevent Behavior Problems
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When a pet develops a behavior problem, it may seem that it developed overnight. In some cases this may be true. Some behavior problems are the result of a pet's reaction to changes in his environment or routine. Being aware of the types of changes that predispose pets to problems allows owners to take a proactive approach by both preparing the pet for the change and actively helping him adjust. We sometimes overlook the fact that our pets will not just automatically successfully cope with the changes we impose on them. A move to a new location for example, can be a common trigger for separation anxiety problems in dogs. In general, dogs are much less tolerant of being left by themselves in unfamiliar environments than they are in familiar ones. It is also common for a dog to develop symptoms of separation anxiety after returning home from being boarded. Even though he is back in his familiar environment, being apart from his owner when he or she leaves for work now causes him distress.

Changes in composition of the family or in the family's schedule can also cause problems for dogs. Children going away to college or an adult returning to work or working longer hours, causing the dog to be left alone more often can trigger destructiveness, housesoiling or excessive barking. On the other hand, when young children are home more in the summer, bringing their friends the dog is expected to get along well with, aggression or territorial problems can result if the dog is not comfortable with unfamiliar children coming and going.

The behavior of both dogs and cats can be severely disrupted by the addition of a new pet. Improper introductions predispose pets to fighting problems. With cats in particular, a poorly planned introduction that results in a fight can set the stage for the cats' relationship for months to come. Cats are also very sensitive to changes in their litterbox. It is not a good idea for example to continually switch brands of litter, searching for one that is on sale, or whatever is in stock at the local store. If a cat is using his litterbox reliably, don't make changes.

Cats who are not well socialized or friendly, often do not react well to vacationing friends and relatives visiting the home. This can trigger urine-marking or scratching of objects other than the scratching post. Because scratching is primarily a marking behavior, a cat may decide to expand his scratching behavior in an attempt to reclaim his territory.

If you are a pet owner and are anticipating either short-term or permanent changes in your routine or lifestyle, consider how these events may impact your pet. If possible, it is usually helpful to expose your pet to the change slowly or gradually. If you know that your pet tends to be shy, fearful, or not very adaptable when it comes to changes, a consultation with a professional animal behaviorist may be helpful. It is almost always easier to prevent problems than it is to resolve them.