



Health and Behavior: The Critical Connection

By Barbara Kahn

Help! I can't houstrain this dog!

Help! My dog has started growling at me!

Help! My dog isn't listening to anything I say anymore!

Sometimes in working with dogs their behavior problems, things just aren't what they seem. Issues can be far more complex than they appear on the surface. Since communicating with another species is often challenging, owners may make serious mistakes trying to interpret the behaviors they observe. Incorrectly diagnosed, we can miss serious medical issues masquerading as behavior problems.

With 25 years of veterinary nursing experience behind me, it is often clear to me that there are some dogs are presented to me with problems that require veterinary intervention before the owner and I can begin working on a resolution.

A typical example of this might be the issue of houstraining. While it's true that many houstraining problems arise from inadequate supervision, lack of adequate confinement or poor timing, sorting out why a dog does not become houstrained, or seems inexplicably to lose its houstraining, may require some detective work. Owners often interpret their dogs' urinary accidents as deliberate or spiteful which truly is not the case. However, it is not uncommon for accidents resulting from urinary tract infections, diabetes, kidney or liver disease or abnormalities in the dog's urogenital system to appear to an owner like stubbornness or stupidity. After a thorough veterinary examination, it becomes apparent that the dog's medical condition is making urinary control impossible.





Sudden changes in diet, feeding low quality food and treats, irritable bowel disease and intestinal parasites often cause dogs to experience gastrointestinal discomfort that may result in housetraining setbacks. Diets laden with salt, sugar, preservatives, dyes, and even glutes (for dogs that may be gluten-sensitive) can wreak havoc with a dog's ability to become dependably housetrained. Curing the problem is often as simple as improving the animal's diet.

The depressed dog that loses interest in daily activities could be suffering from any number of medical problems such as muscle soreness (the weekend warrior syndrome), arthritic changes, heart disease or even cancer. Although these conditions are most frequently diagnosed in older pets, it is not unheard of for young adult dogs to be afflicted with such problems too. Sudden changes or a gradual decrease in your pet's activity level, appetite or interest in previously enjoyed activities could signal a decline in your pet's health.

Strange behavior can often be attributed to poor health rather than poor training. Years ago, a lovely Cocker Spaniel named Tugger became one of my private training students after he failed to respond to the harsh techniques used by another trainer. His owner's description of Tugger's odd behaviors seemed clear cut at first. However, in working with this young dog, it became obvious to me that something was amiss. I suggested a medical examination which revealed that poor Tugger had a terminal liver condition. His cognitive changes were due to a buildup in his bloodstream of ammonia that his liver was unable to clear. He was confused, fearful and disoriented but it was NOT a training problem.

Owners often call WonderDogs with questions about their pet's increasingly aggressive behavior. After collecting lengthy history about the dog's breed, diet, exercise level, genetic background and upbringing, we generally request a complete thyroid screen. Hypothyroidism is a prevalent condition in dogs and while, for some dogs, there may also be more visible signs, often the first or only sign displayed is aggression! No amount of training or behavior modification is going to be effective with these hypothyroid dogs until we treat the thyroid disease.





Perhaps you notice that your dog is no longer responding to your commands. Before chastising your dog, it might be wise to have his hearing checked and make sure no ear infection or hearing loss has occurred. Fearfulness or timidity that becomes apparent, especially in an older pet, may simply be an indication that your dog's eyesight is failing. Or perhaps your dog gets startled and snaps when he is approached from behind. While this might look on the surface like a grumpy pet, could one or more of his senses be failing?

Injuries can be subtle in appearance but can produce a dog that resents being touched. Consider the sad story of an owner whose dog was euthanized because the dog suddenly began snapping at their little boy. The veterinarian who was asked to euthanize the animal found a small pencil jammed into her ear canal puncturing her eardrum. Aggression? Sure! Inexplicable? Hardly!

Infected teeth, overly long nails, and even severe skin problems can all contribute to behaviors that, on the surface, look behavioral in origin but can only be addressed after the medical issues have been resolved. Before assuming that your beloved pet has "turned bad," consider first having a thorough physical examination and routine blood tests run by your veterinarian. The most basic testing should include a complete blood count (CBC), a blood profile to test organ function, a urinalysis, a complete thyroid screen (not just a T-4), heartworm test and tick panel (for Lyme, Ehrlichia, Borrelia).

Make sure your dog is on a high quality diet. For excellent information about diet and other dog-related issues, I highly recommend subscribing to the "Whole Dog Journal" www.whole-dog-journal.com. The "WDJ" is published monthly, does not accept commercial advertising, and reviews dog-related products honestly and objectively. (The February 2006 issue contains an article that rates the best dry dog foods on the market. It is available at www.whole-dog-journal.com/pub/backissues.html)

Yes, sometimes soiling in the house or snapping at the neighbor's kid is clearly a behavioral issue. Yet so often these problems are precipitated or exacerbated by illness, injury or other medical complications. We might be doing our pet dogs a tremendous disservice if we don't make every effort to rule those out before making assumptions about why the problems are arising and how to fix them.





Next time your dog's behavior seems unusual, unexpected or atypical, make an appointment with your veterinarian to confirm that all's well regarding his health. Let your veterinarian know of any changes in water consumption, exercise tolerance, appetite, sensitivity to touch, elimination habits and behavior changes. Once you're convinced he's medically sound, it's time to consult a competent trainer or behavior specialist who'll work with you and your dog and help get things back to normal.

Enjoy yourself! Enjoy your dogs!

