

FACT SHEET

Behavioural Problems

This information sheet has been designed by Naturediet to help outline common pet behavioural problems with indications of how to solve them. Behavioural issues can be complex and difficult to eradicate, though there are many ways in which we can help.

Breeding

One problem that has occurred over the years is poor breeding, especially in the pure breeds. Unfortunately disreputable breeders have interbred dogs purely to make money, resulting in dogs with behavioural disturbances such as dominant aggression, excitability and fearfulness.

It is advisable when buying a puppy to find out as much as you can about the parentage and see the puppy with the bitch and if possible both parents. This will give you a good idea of the temperament your puppy will have when fully grown. Avoid buying a puppy from an excessively shy or nervous bitch, as in addition to inheritance, the behaviour of the mother is likely to teach the puppy to react as violently as her to the presence of strangers or other disturbing influences.

Socialising a puppy

It is very important to try and prevent behavioural problems arising in a new puppy. This can be achieved by socialising your puppy at a very young age. Before a puppy is vaccinated they can be introduced to a range of environmental stimuli including household noises, other pets, children, the car, and new environments such as friend's houses.

Once vaccinated, owners should work hard at introducing their puppy to as much stimulus as possible, for example:

- Introduce your puppy to as many people as possible in a calm and controlled way both inside and out of the home. The puppy should soon learn to accept a degree of handling, and children should also learn to respect the puppy
- Introduce your puppy to the countryside. If your puppy is going to live in the city it is still advisable to introduce him to the sights, sounds and smells of the countryside. Visiting the countryside for the first time as an adult can be a frightening experience, or your dog may decide to chase wildlife and get lost in the process
- Introduce your puppy to towns and cities, this is important for a puppy to be able to cope with the hustle and bustle, particularly for the country dog who may not otherwise cope on the rare occasions they will visit towns and cities
- Cats should be introduced at an early age. This may not guarantee a lifetime friendship but it will help the puppy to respect the cat as part of the pack. The cat will usually learn to take charge of the dog
- It is important that your puppy is introduced to other dogs when being walked. Do not be over-protective of your puppy if he causes some dispute, this is probably the older dog telling your puppy that he doesn't want to play
- Puppies should be introduced to grooming at an early age and the act of combing and brushing will help the puppy accept close handling
- From an early age, check their teeth and gums, pulling the lips up and drawing your finger along the teeth as there will be occasion as adults when this is a necessity
- Many dogs do not like having their feet and paws touched and this can make nail clipping problematic. The easiest method of clipping toenails is to have the dog in a standing position and for the paws to be lifted in a similar manner as you would a horse: bend the leg at the knee so it points towards their backend: the dog, being unable to see any implements being used and what is being done is less likely to pull away and less wary of the procedure

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- When feeding a puppy it is important to sometimes take the food away so as not to allow the puppy to become possessive or dominant
- Puppies that are never left alone may grow up to be dependent on their owners. It is advisable when socialising a puppy to leave them on their own for short periods of time in order for them to learn to cope with solitude

Prevention and treatment of common problems

Destructiveness

This often occurs in dogs that are bored due to lack of exercise or stimulation and puppies used to human company often display destructive behaviour when left. This is commonly known as separation anxiety and can be prevented by getting your dog used to being alone whilst you are at home, not letting your dog follow you around, and reducing the amount of interaction.

There are various treatments you could try. Leaving a radio or light on whilst out, may help reassure your dog that you will return. Never punish your dog for bad behaviour on your return as it is probably too late, the dog will have invariably caused the damage hours ago and will not associate the crime with the punishment. Slowly adopt a training programme where your dog is left for longer periods rewarding good behaviour on your return. Ensure your dog is well fed and has a comfortable place to lie when left.

Attitude to this problem is an extremely important. Owners with this problem will probably have a very close mutual dependant relationship with their dog and dislike leaving them just as the dog dislikes being left. In such cases it is important for the owner to reduce their level of interaction possibly arranging for other people to feed and exercise the pet. This will decrease dependence, reducing the contrast for the dog between the owner's presence and absence.

A crate is extremely useful in these circumstances and can help protect personal belongings from such behaviour. Do not view it as a prison though, think more 'den'. To provide a puppy with their own comfortable space is very comforting to them just as a bedroom is to us: it provides a safe place to sleep and peace and quiet when needed. It can also help with toilet training as dogs would rather not soil their bed and will either hold on or bring their urgent need to your attention thereby reducing accidents.

We would recommend a crate to any new puppy owner as they are useful in so many ways, both to the puppy and the owner. The puppy will not want to be locked away at first, and will make immense noise and do anything it can to be let out to accompany you: be firm and it may take only 3 nights for them to become comfortable with the space and accept this as part of their routine.

Introducing a puppy to the crate

Introduce them to the crate by placing a toy or a treat inside and entice them to enter largely of their own accord: do not close the door in this first instance, instead let them go in and out a few times.

The next stage may be closing the door but not locking it with them inside for just a few moments, open it again and let them come to you: next get them to lie down inside with the door closed for a few minutes.

The next stage is to lock the door with them inside whilst you sit somewhere they can see you, keep doing this, increasing the length of time they are in the cage and eventually leaving the room for a few moments at a time. The less noise and fuss you make during the training, the more at ease the puppy will be, though you should always offer them praise if they have been good and taken to the training.

On the first night of being left alone, often in a new house altogether, they will scream: ignore it and they will eventually wear themselves out and go to sleep. As soon as you react to their behaviour they win. It may be necessary to just check on their wellbeing, but the best way to do this is to walk past the crate without looking directly at them or speaking to them i.e. get a glass of water from the kitchen and then leave the room again, this relates to the puppy that they are safe and you are still around but cannot demand attention at all times. A covering over the crate at night can help reduce them being woken by movement and natural light.

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Fearfulness

This personality trait can be inherited or due to early environmental sources. For example, puppies that start life as the runt of the litter are more likely to develop nervous or excitable personalities in later life.

A dog will show signs of fearfulness by trembling, cowering and panting. All dogs will find different types of stimulus frightening with strangers, traffic, fireworks and crowds being the most common causes.

It is best to treat this problem gently. As far as possible the immediate environment should be temporarily arranged to cause minimum upset to the dog. The commonly suggested treatment is called systematic desensitisation. This involves calming your dog before the feared stimulus is presented. If your dog becomes afraid during treatment, all attention should be withdrawn so as not to run the risk of rewarding a fearful behaviour. When your dog is completely calm again the feared stimulus should be presented at a lower level. This method of treatment can be used for most fears and phobias.

Dominant Dogs

Any breed of dog can become a dominant dog, usually due to a collection of personality traits both inherited and acquired since birth.

Factors that can influence dominance include the litter size, sex, age at weaning, whether hand reared, personality of owner and the way he relates to his dog, level and quality of training and at what age given, presence of other dogs, and hormonal status.

When a dog lives within a canine pack it will dominate some of the pack members but will submit to others that are above it in the pack hierarchy. Ambitious dogs and bitches will make intermittent bids to improve their ranking, even challenging the pack leader with the hope of taking up the position themselves.

While a domesticated dog lives with a family, the dog's desire to be dominant or submissive can change dependant on the situation and environment. It is important that the dog's owner should be pack leader in all situations. It is also important that the dog should not be allowed to consider itself superior to any of the human members of the pack.

Dominant dogs are like some people, mostly pleasant but sometimes disagreeable. Owning a dominant dog can sometimes be a problem if the owner is not able to control the dog, the most common cause of aggression by dogs towards their owners or family is a contest for dominance.

When a dog bites or even threatens a human it is not only a shock, but a serious problem which should never be allowed to happen. You may find that you need some professional help from a veterinary surgeon or animal behaviourist to deal with your dog.

Here are some helpful hints to help you acquire dominance over your dog:

1. Make sure that your dog has his own bed to sleep in and never let him on the furniture. Deny him access to key areas of the house such as the bedroom and never let him sleep on your lap: you should however be able to sit on his bed.
2. Do not play games that your dog can 'win', such as tug of war, this can imply that your dog is as strong as you are which will reinforce their dominance. The best games to play would be "'etch games' but should be under control making your dog sit before each throw. You should be in charge of opening the game and bringing it to a close.
3. Do not allow your dog to demand what time he is walked, fed etc. Your daily routine should be determined by yourself, and not your dog.
4. Do not allow your dog to beg scraps from the table; it is best to shut the dog out of the room when eating. Never feed from a human plate.

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Dominant dogs can be tricky to exercise. Accustom your dog to being handled on the head, neck and shoulder region and lightly press down. This is a very dominant gesture on your part. Stand over your dog from behind and lift his front legs off the ground. Keep the dog's feet off the ground for about 30 seconds and reward your dog verbally if he remains quiet - rebuke struggling. Put your dog in the submissive position, which is on his side and hold him there with one hand on his mouth and the other on his chest for about 30 seconds. If he was quiet then praise him.

You will also need to do some basic training exercises teaching your dog to SIT, STAY, COME and HEAL on command. All commands must be strictly enforced using error-less learning techniques where the dog is rewarded for correct responses but never punished for errors.

If your dominant dog is male (approximately 7 out of 10 dominance issues occur in male dogs rather than bitches) then it is possible that castration will help. This will particularly help with dogs that are inclined to roam after bitches or fight other male dogs. Dominant dogs can be very rewarding companions once the owner has achieved the correct status. This is because a dominant dog retains a pride and presence, which more submissive and eager to please counterparts have lost.

How can Naturediet help?

Diet is influential on behaviour; the protein content of the diet and the protein quality are particularly important. Low quality, poorly assimilated proteins can lead to a build up of urea in the body, which acts as a toxic waste product and can precipitate states such as hyperactivity. The over processing of meats changes and denatures the protein making it more difficult to assimilate (see Feeding for Health fact sheet).

Dogs can also develop reactions to one or more of the chemical additives present in many proprietary pet foods. This can often result in behavioural disturbances such as hyperactivity. Recent studies on children have proven the link between diet and behaviour and the same effects may be seen in other species.

An elimination diet is the best method for testing how related the behavioural problems are to the diet. For a period of a few weeks the dog should be fed a single protein source, such as chicken, and rice, with a few fresh vegetables and no other food at all. Naturediet Chicken, which contains only chicken, rice and vegetables is a suitable elimination diet or Naturediet Fish, which contains only fish, rice and vegetables. The main object of the exercise is to avoid all the common allergens in food such as wheat, soy, maize, barley and chemical additives.

Alternatively Naturediet Sensitive may be used, containing salmon, prawn, vegetables and rice, this menu will be completely different to previous foods fed since salmon and prawn are rarely found in a dog's diet and may lead to a more concise result. This will allow you to make a more informed decision regarding the diet and any associated behaviour issues.

The Naturediet range of pet foods DO NOT contain any artificial additives and are therefore ideal for helping to diagnose food related reactions.

Our aim at Naturediet is to provide the highest quality, easy to metabolise protein source with carbohydrate in the form of brown rice, noted for its non-allergic properties. Naturediet is a balanced, complete diet and as such does not require any additional supplement; once introduced into the diet, it should be fed by itself for a period of 7-10 days to test the response. If there is an improvement in behaviour on this diet it can be used as a maintenance diet for an adult dog.

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