

This factsheet describes some of the basic behaviour problems that you may encounter with your new dog. There are a number of reasons why your dog may display problem behaviours. He may not have been 'socialised' with people and other dogs when he was a puppy, or he may not have had the training he needed. He may be bored, over-boisterous or his behaviour may be due to insecurity and anxiety. Identifying the possible reasons for problem behaviours can help in rectifying them quickly.

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Factsheet

Problem behaviour



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Being left alone

Dogs are pack animals and they have always enjoyed the company of other dogs or family members. A range of problems can arise when they are left alone, some of which cause behaviours such as destructiveness, howling and messing. Common reasons for antisocial behaviour fall into the following categories:

Boredom

A dog's energy levels vary and can depend on his breed type or age. Wild dogs tend to spend most of their time searching and hunting for food – so it is not surprising that some domestic pet dogs get bored and cause all sorts of mischief. These dogs may accept short periods of being left alone but they must be offered lots of mental and physical activities both while their owners are with them and when they are left alone. Owners must be prepared to invest time with these dogs and be inventive with games, toys and food used to keep their dog's minds occupied.

Attention seeking

Attention seeking behaviour problems can be miserable for a dog owner. Many people think that these problems are caused by lack of attention but in fact it is the opposite. Attention seeking problems start when a dog gets attention for disruptive and undesirable behaviour, such as barking, whining, jumping up, mouthing or chewing. The dog receives the wrong messages from us if we talk, look at or touch him when he is demonstrating these behaviours and comes to the conclusion that it is his disruptive behaviour that is getting him noticed. It takes patience to train such a dog to learn acceptable behaviours and actions.

Insecurity and anxiety

Many dogs, particularly rescue dogs, feel insecure when placed in a new environment. It is a lot to ask of a dog to expect him to immediately feel settled with new people, in a new environment and living a new routine. There is a fine line between mollycoddling a pet dog and being supportive of an insecure dog. An anxious dog will tend to over bond with one person and can't cope when he is left on his own. The owner must spend time with the dog to patiently guide him and build up his independence to help him to get over his anxieties.

Car travel

Usually, the very first experience a dog has with a car is when he is taken away from his mother or when he goes to the vet. These experiences are upsetting and can cause a fear of car travel. Dogs can also get hysterically over excited about going out in the car, especially if they usually travel by car to their favourite place or to go out on a walk. This can lead to barking problems and a dangerous lack of control over the dog.

Both problems can be solved with time and owners should not be tempted to rush the process. Take time to get your dog used to the movement, sound and smell of the car. Dogs that are fearful of car travel need to build up good associations with going in the car, and over excited dogs should be encouraged to keep calm during car journeys.

Fear and nervousness

The human world can be a strange place for a dog and situations that we take for granted such as a car alarm or siren can seem a threat to a dog. Equally, a household appliance such as a washing machine may trigger a fear response. Every dog needs to be socialised and exposed to a range of people, dogs and environments as a puppy to make sure he can cope with situations in the future. Unfortunately many dogs don't get the socialising they need, resulting in a frightening experience when they do come across the unusual or unexpected. A fearful dog will require a calm environment to build up his confidence at his own pace.

Boisterous and status related behaviours

Most dogs fit into family life in a new household very well, but also need to be taught some ground rules. Your dog needs to learn that responding to you is a good and enjoyable thing and he needs structure in his daily routine. Unexpected events, like a stranger calling at the door, should not be met with boisterous or hysterical behaviour from the dog.

Your dog needs to learn where he stands in the hierarchy of the household, that you are in charge, not him. Youngsters in particular tend to go through a natural teenage stage and try many different tactics to increase their status in the household. By being a calm and consistent owner, teaching your dog the right behaviours, you can avoid any long-term problems.

Breed traits

There are many breeds of dog: some were originally bred to hunt, some to guard, and others to herd livestock. Many breeds are prone to specific behaviours and this can lead to problems. To give you a few examples, German Shepherds tend to instinctively guard in situations where they feel there is a threat, Border Collies can be very sound sensitive leading to fear based problems with loud noises, while Terriers are generally feisty and confident and can develop status problems. It is important for any new owner to carry out lots of research about the breed of dog they have chosen to ensure they can provide correct and suitable training and socialising for that particular breed of dog.

References and recommended reading

The information contained in this factsheet gives a very basic description of problem and unwanted behaviours that dog owners may encounter.

A trained animal psychologist can help with these and many other behaviour issues. Seek help early; ask your vet, or contact:

The Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors on 01386 751151

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home's Behaviour Advice Line on 0905 020 0222 (calls cost 25p per minute)

Recommended reading:
Ain't Misbehavin' by David Appleby

