

# Meeting Dogs' & Cats' Needs

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# Statistics



- In 2024
  - 59.8 million US homes owned dogs<sup>1</sup>
  - 42.2 million US homes owned cats<sup>1</sup>
  - 2 million pets were relinquished to shelters<sup>2</sup>
- Top cited reason for relinquishment:  
**BEHAVIOR!**<sup>3</sup>
- **Pets with behavioral issues are more at risk for abuse and neglect<sup>4</sup>**



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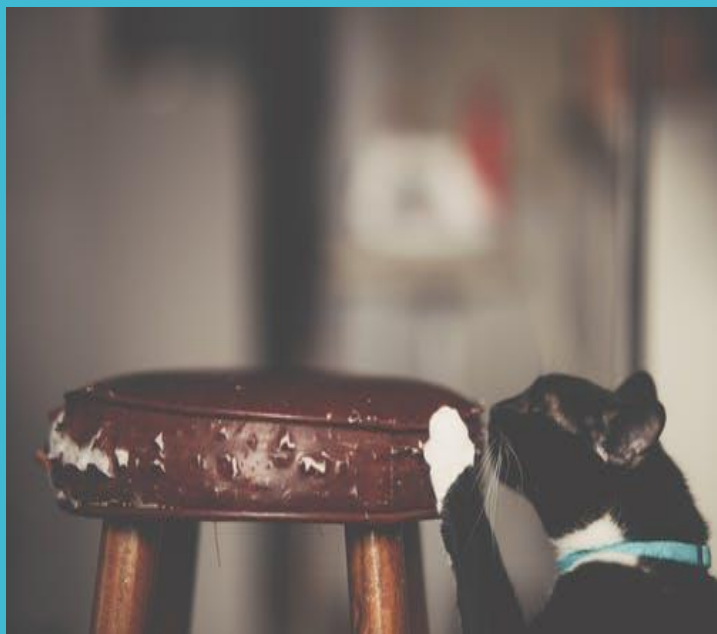


# Behavioral Reasons for Relinquishment

- Aggression
- Destruction (digging, chewing, scratching)
- “Excessive” energy
- Disobedience (jumping on people, pulling on lead)
- Vocalization
- House-soiling<sup>2</sup>

Lord et al. 2008.  
Health and  
behavior problems  
in dogs and cats  
one week and one  
month after  
adoption from  
animal shelters.  
*JAVMA*. 233: 1715-  
1722. <sup>5</sup>

- 50.6% of pet owners reported behavior problems 1-month post-adoption
  - Significantly more difficult adjustment period
  - Significantly less likely to visit with the DVM
- Dogs: chewing, digging, scratching
- Cats: scratching, high energy level, and house-soiling<sup>6</sup>



## Problem...or normal, species-specific behavior?

- Vocalization
- Digging
- Chewing
- "Disobedience"
- Scratching
- "High" energy

## Responsibility of vet staff

1. Proactively set expectations for owners *prior* to considering a certain species or breed
2. Retroactively provide sound, humane, and practical advice as preventative measures or to troubleshoot



## Five Freedoms

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury, or disease
4. **Freedom to express normal behavior!!!**
5. Freedom from fear and distress

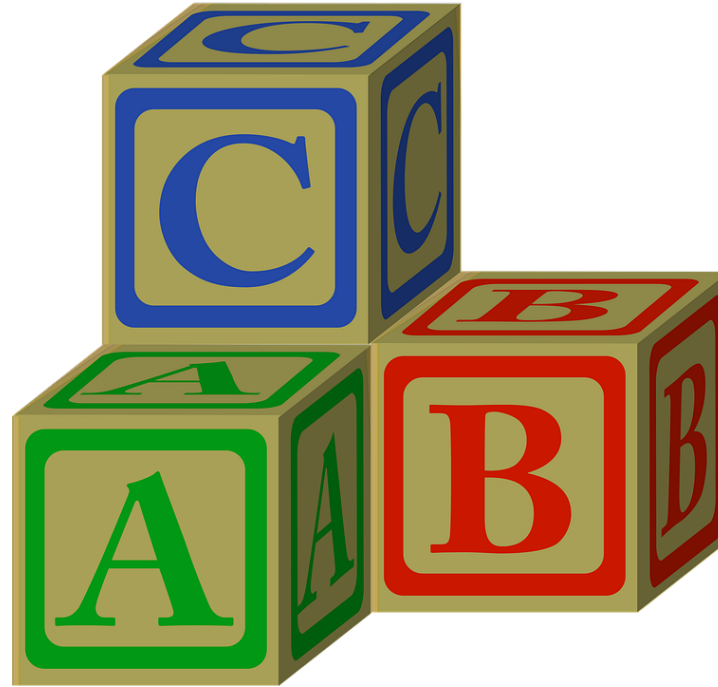
## Five Domains<sup>7</sup>

1. Nutrition
2. Environment
3. Physical health
4. **Behavior!!!**
5. **(Overall) mental state!!!**

# Behavioral Counseling

- Puppy and kitten owners who received behavioral counseling at first vet exam reported significantly fewer undesirable behaviors<sup>8,9</sup>
- Set expectations
  - E.g.: owners who find high energy problematic may not be best fit for kittens or puppies
  - E.g.: owners with limited time to train may not be best fit for kittens, puppies, or pets with known behavior problems
  - E.g.: city may not be best fit for herding breeds with many quick-moving triggers
  - E.g.: city may not be best fit for working and sporting dogs who benefit from aerobic exercise

# Functional Behavior Assessments



- A – antecedent
- B – behavior
- C - consequence

1. What is the function of the behavior?
  - Is it truly a problem, or not aligned with owner's expectations?
2. How can we manipulate the environment & antecedents to prevent rehearsal of the behavior?
  - Or provide appropriate outlets

# Digging



- Aerosolization of scents
- Leaving scent marks
- Investigation
- Thermoregulation
- Terriers predisposed

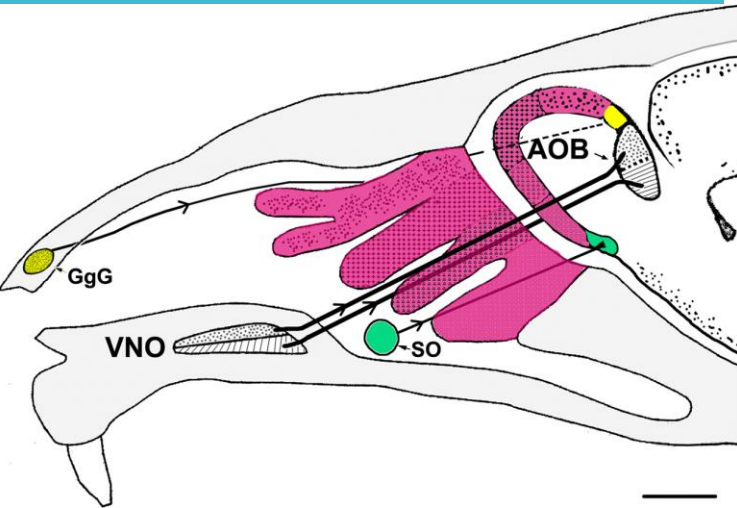
# Digging

- Burying treats
- Puzzle feeders
- Filling kiddie pools with water & interesting objects
- Earth dog trials
- Lure coursing



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# Chewing, mouthing, licking



- Food acquisition/nutrition
- Dental health
- Self-soothing
- Scent gathering (social & prey detection)
- Herding breeds predisposed to nipping
- Puppies & play biting

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# Chewing, mouthing, licking

- Lick Mat, Kong (can be frozen)
- Flirt Pole
- Nylabones (with supervision)
- Sheepdog trials, herding balls
- Puppy biting: 1. say “no,” 2. pull away **only once** puppy releases, 3. redirect with toy & reward



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# High energy

- Working dogs
- Sporting dogs
- Herding dogs
- Problematic in the city if noise/motion stimuli induce fear, but it's the dog's main opportunity outdoors



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# High energy



- Trails, running, hiking
- Agility, swimming, lure coursing
- Scent-work / nose-work
  - Nina Ottoson's puzzles
  - Snuffle mats
  - Busy Buddy, IQ treat ball

# Scratching

- Removal of layered sheaths for claw health
- Leaving scent marks
- Fabric resembling natural surfaces
- Furniture in a socially meaningful spot



# Scratching



- Scratching posts (sisal rope)
- Cat trees WITH scratching posts
- Cardboard boxes / Tiger Tough townhouse
- Place in prominent area of home for cat
  - And right next to furniture being scratched
- Lure to use with food, catnip, or Feliway™
  - And reward each time it is used appropriately
  - Do NOT punish!

# High energy



- Play
  - Is it truly excessive, or just not in alignment with owners' expectations?
  - Chasing
  - Climbing
  - Pouncing
  - Grabbing feet
  - Kitten biting



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# High energy

- At least 3 episodes of play per day & rotate
  - Long-distance toys (wands, Cat Dancer, balls/mice)
  - Automated, interactive toys
  - Puzzle feeders (Doc & Phoebe)
  - Tunnels
- Owners should be educated on body language signs that play may escalate
- Kitten biting: 1. say “no,” 2. pull away **only once** kitten releases, 3. redirect with toy & reward



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# “Crepuscular” activity

- Playtime prior to bedtime
- Meal/snack prior to bedtime
- Cat TV prior to bedtime
- Intellectual exercises
  - Scent-work/nose-work, clicker training

# Separation / Confinement Anxiety



- Vocalization +/- destruction +/- house-soiling may = separation anxiety or confinement distress: get camera!
- Designate a safe zone
  - Reward for going there, including when you are home
  - Crate training may or may not be contraindicated
- Physical exercise beforehand
  - *as long as* it is in an environment that does NOT stress the pet out
- Downplay departures & arrivals
- Practice gradual departures
- Provide enrichment / high value food-toy at departure
- NO punishment!

# House-soiling (Dogs)



- Is it truly behavioral...or medical?
- Healthy, adult dogs should be able to hold bladder for 8+ hours
  - Consider for dogs who are aggressive to strangers / walkers
  - Consider for dogs who are afraid walking outdoors
- Puppy should be able to hold bladder every hour per month of age
  - Start by taking puppy out every hour
  - Reward each time puppy eliminates appropriately
  - Strategically take puppy out after eating, playing, and naps
- Can confine puppy when no supervision (as long as no confinement distress)
- No punishment for accidents!
- Use enzymatic cleaner to wipe up

# THE IDEAL LITTER BOX

Created by: Dr. Vanessa Spano, DVM, DACVB; 2025

## Common Causes of House-Soiling

- Medical!
  - Comprehensive bloodwork + sterile urinalysis +/- fecal + imaging
- Inadequate hygiene
- Location preference/aversion

## Common Causes of House-Soiling

- Conflict / Marking
  - Social pressure (other cats, people, household change)
    - Lack of control, unpredictability, punishment
- Litter preference / aversion

## Style of Box

- 1.5 x length of cat
- Wide, uncovered
- Low-sided for painful/older cats



## Appropriate Hygiene

- Scoop at least once / day
- Completely replace litter at least once / week
  - Wash box with ONLY warm water & soap
  - NO phenols!

## Set-Up

- At least 1 box per cat
- Location
  - All different locations
    - Away from bossy cats
  - Easy-to-access
  - Avoid high-traffic, loud areas

## Litter:

- At least 2 in. depth (cats NEED to be able to dig!)
- Unscented
- Soft, fine, pellets, clay
- Keep track of preferred litter by providing multiple options (HINT: if the cat digs through the substrate - the cat "digs" that litter!)

## Troubleshooting House-soiling

- Clean soiled areas with enzymatic, anti-bacterial cleaner (Anti-Icky Poo, Urine Off)
- If cat soils on:
  - Cloth/bed - replace litter with pee pad
  - Hard surface - don't provide any litter (i.e.: the box is empty!)

## Troubleshooting House-soiling

- Reward every time for appropriate urination
  - NO PUNISHMENT!
- Place competing, calming pheromones (Feliway) in soiled areas

## Troubleshooting House-soiling

- Change the function of the soiled area
  - Add bed/food (less likely to eliminate where they rest/sleep)
  - Reinforce for more appropriate marking
    - add scratching post/corner rub

# Ladder of Canine Fear-Aggression

Created by: Dr. Vanessa Spano, DVM, DACVB; 2025



# Ladder of Feline Fear-Aggression

Created by: Dr. Vanessa Spano, DVM, DACVB; 2025



# Aggression = AVOID TRIGGERS!

1. Safety / liability
2. Prevents distress for the patient
3. **Exposure therapy when fearful / aggressive is NOT a learning opportunity!**
  - Elevated stress hormones impair the genetic transcription required for learning
4. Prevents rehearsal of the problematic behavior!!!
  - The more you have the chance to rehearse a behavior, the more you will just keep doing it!
  - **Exposing our pets in hopes they will “learn” is WRONG! It only strengthens and maintains the neural connections coding for the problematic behavior they are displaying (“neuroplasticity”)**

# Counseling Owners on Choosing the Right Trainer

- Humane, evidenced-based, reward-based
- Educated in learning theory, psychology, ABA
- Recognizes when the pet is showing even subtle body language signs of distress and STOPS exposure
  - To avoid distress
  - To avoid rehearsal of the problematic behavior
- **NO flooding / sensitization / exposure therapy**
- **NO punishment-based training**
  - Including choke/shock/prong/citronella/vibration collars
- **NO balanced training**
- **NO alpha / dominance vocabulary**
- Good credentials: CPDT – KA, KPA, CDBC/CCBC (IAABC)

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Questions?

