

Southern California Service Helps Solve Problem Behavior in Animals

Animals are sometimes referred to the behavior clinic showing very strange and inexplicable problems. Or they react with great fear to things that humans take for granted.

Dogs, for instance, can be afraid of pager noises, camera lens noises, jet aircraft and even hot air balloons.

Pat Melese, chief of the UC Veterinary Medical Center (UCVMC) Behavior Service in San Diego, says “We see about three dogs to one cat in a wide range of cases including aggression, separation anxiety, fearfulness or noise phobias.”

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Dr. Melese, who has been a behaviorist for 14 years, says, “Most of the cases involving dogs are problems of aggression toward other dogs or toward people. We see some aggressive cats, but mostly cats come in because of elimination problems in the home.”

One cat reacted to his own reflection—he became aroused and aggressive in a room with mirrors—and was a danger to his owner. Dr. Melese had the owner bring a mirror to the exam room, but the cat totally ignored it!

Once the behavior was shown to be specific to the home environment, an investigation brought out the reason for the cat’s aggression—he associated stray cats viewed outside with mirrors inside the room. The owner was able to learn handling techniques that could calm the cat down.

“A behavior may appear to be very strange,” says Dr. Melese. “Treating such a case sometimes requires think-



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Nikko, a family Akita, reacts to noises such as rain and a home sprinkler system by destroying parts of the house. Patrick Melese, chief veterinarian of the Behavior Service, is working with Nikko, who is on a “sit” command with the help of a halter, to help the dog focus. Nikko’s owner is learning how to direct the dog’s attention in order to implement behavior modification steps.

ing like Sherlock Holmes—first you have to solve a mystery of domestic animal behavior in residential quarters. You take a careful history and begin to gather clues to determine the likely cause of the behavior.” Lab work also may be indicated to rule out medical problems.

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Treatment requires a bit of counselling—which is not a normal part of the veterinary curriculum—to get a family system to alter its behavior in order to change what happens to the pet. People have to be motivated to consider making changes in how they interact with their pet in order to teach the pet new behaviors.

Some families do quite well with their pet, considering that animals often develop behavior problems over a long period of time before they are brought in. Dr. Melese recommends

that pet owners talk to their veterinarian about a developing behavior problem or get a referral before the problem becomes severe.

Dr. Melese’s objective is to help people and their animals maintain strong bonds of friendship and affection for each other and to prevent pets from losing their homes due to problematic behaviors.

For more information about the UCVMC Behavior Service or to make an appointment, pet owners can call (858) 759-6837. The clinic is based in Rancho Santa Fe, located in north San Diego County, and patients are also seen at pet specialty centers in La Mesa and San Diego. The UCVMC is a joint venture between the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine and UC San Diego to better serve Southern California.

Behavior Service resident Laurie Bergman greets Midnight, a family cat whose problem behavior is elimination in places other than the litterbox.



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