

Taking a behavioral history

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Taking a behavioral history is the most important component in dealing with behavioral problems. The behavioral history should be comprehensive yet this task need not be overwhelming.

A printed form is very helpful when you start to take the behavioral history. This allows the clinician to use a consistent pattern of questions and hopefully elicit all the information that is needed to make a diagnosis, a prognosis and set up a treatment plan. When taking behavior histories, it is important to **listen** in a non-judgmental manner so as not to stop the flow of information that is needed to understand the problem.

Usually it is helpful to start the history by asking about the 24-hour day. Important information includes the household routine and pet-owner interactions. "

- Where does the pet sleep? Who invites the pet on the bed? If the problem is aggression and the pet sleeps on the bed, does aggression occur there?
- When does the pet get up, and when does it go outside. "
- Does the dog roam free or is it confined in a yard?
- Where does the pet stay during the day if it is alone?
- How long is the pet alone on any given day?
- Does the dog bark, whine, soil or is destructive when they are gone?
- Ask also who feeds the pet and what the pet is fed.
- What does the pet do during family meals?
- Is there a specific amount of time spent daily on play or training? Is this programmed time random, pet initiated or owner initiated?

How does the pet behave with family members; this is commonly called an aggression screening. Ask if the pet growls, snarls, snap or bites in any of the following situations:

- Touching or handling the food bowl
- Removing items from the dogs mouth
- Grooming the pet or wiping its feet when it comes in from outside
- Hugging, pushing or stepping over the dog
- Petting the dog
- Touching toys
- How does the dog walk on a leash, will it heel or does it forge ahead.

Remember that some family members may have problems with these things and others may not.

In addition ask about the early history of the pet and where it was obtained and how old was the pet when they got it. Certain problems may have been there before this owner obtained the pet especially if the pet was a stray or surrendered for adoption to a shelter. Alternately, they may have obtained the puppy from a source that does not provide good early puppy care or socialization. The training history is important so, ask if they have ever taken this dog to obedience class and who took the dog. Did the dog do well in class? Do they still do training with the dog? What will the

pet will do for them on command? A description of the pet's personality is often illuminating, it gives some idea how the owner perceives the pet.

Next the consultation can focus on the problem behavior. First, ask what is the problem they came to see you about and how long has it been present. Next, a description of the problem behavior is helpful. Start with the most recent occurrence of the behavior since this is always uppermost in their minds. Ask them to describe it like they are drawing a picture. Your goal is to focus on what happened, not on what anyone thought the pet meant. It helps to let the owner know that although they may have seen the behavior many times, you have not and need a very clear description to help you determine what is going on.

The four W's help, you want to know who, what, when and where.

- Where they were, who was there, where the animal was and what happened.
- You also want to know what the animal did.
- What were its facial expressions?
- If it was an aggressive encounter, was the pet growling, snarling, tail up or down, ears up or down.
- If a bite occurred what kind of bite was it, a puncture wound or a tear. Was there more than one bite?
- Was there any punishment, who intervened to end the encounter if it was aggression and how did the pet respond to the intervention.

Sometimes the description is very vague so walk them through the same episode again trying to get the owners to be more specific in their descriptions. Then ask them to go backwards in time to the next most recent occurrence of the behavior and continuing in this manner as far back as they can go. Often a pattern to the behavior will emerge. This could be a pattern of places, events or people that seem to elicit the behavior. Often not only will the pattern become clear to you, but it will also become clear to the owner.

Next find out what have the owners done in the past to correct any behavioral problems, either the one you are discussing or any others. Also ask about any medications used to treat the behavior either in the past or if the pet is currently on any medications.

Also ask what other behaviors does the pet engage in that are objectionable to them. Often there are other problem areas in addition to the one they have targeted in the appointment. Information on how they have tried to correct or deal with these additional problems is helpful.

The final part of taking a history is not as cut and dried as the earlier information. You need to listen to each case as if you have never heard this problem before, because in essence you have not. There can be circumstances and attitudes that are present in this case that are not in the next even though they both may end up with the same diagnosis. Resist trying to figure out "why" until you have all the other information.

Always end by asking if there is anything else that they want to add which you did not ask them about. They often make revealing statements about the pet and its personality. Common statements like "He is okay as long as he gets his way" or "He runs the household" will often be heard in cases of dominance or conflict aggression. Be sure to also listen to statements where the owners blame themselves for the problem behavior. You must make the owner understand that while they contributed to the problem, most owners are unwilling accomplices; no one wants a problem pet. They were merely doing their best, but what they did got unexpected results from their pet. It is also important to point out to people that all pets have different personalities and therefore respond differently to owner's

actions. That can often explain why an owner who had several pets in the past with no problems, now has one who really has created a problem in their home.

The behavioral history will be the cornerstone to treatment of behavior problems. Be certain to set aside enough time to get the information needed for diagnosis, prognosis and treatment. Do not feel that you need to finalize the diagnosis and treatment at the moment. Just like complicated medical cases, you can gather the information, ask the owners to return at a later time while you evaluate the information, categorize the problem(s) and formulate a treatment plan. With adequate consultation time and good history taking many behavior problems can be treated and improved.