

Using Management for Behavior Problems

When to manage, when to train

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“My dog _____ . Fill in the blank with your dog’s problem behavior (greet people by jumping on them, barks at the windows in the front of the house, counter surfs, is aggressive with other dogs over food bowls, pulls on leash, gets into the trash, darts out the front door, chews shoes, is terrified of storms, drinks from the toilet, barks and lunges at other dogs on walks, is destructive when left alone, won’t come when called, is afraid of strangers, etc.). Whatever the undesirable behavior, if you are like most dog owners, you want it to STOP, sooner than later! What you may not realize is that preventing most behaviors is actually fairly easy by using simple management tools and techniques.

What is management and how does it differ from training? Management involves controlling or modifying a dog’s environment to prevent unwanted behavior. While management does not actually *change* a behavior, it prevents a dog from practicing the behavior and continuing to get reinforced for it. Management can be used successfully on its’ own to stop problem behavior, but it is also a key component in changing behavior through training...the first step in *changing* behavior is *preventing* it from happening.

How do you decide whether to simply manage your dog’s problem behavior or change the behavior using both management and training? There are several factors to consider, such as the ease of managing the behavior, safety of the dog, humans and other pets, owner commitment to changing the behavior, and owner time availability for training. Some behaviors lend themselves to using simple common sense management techniques and tools. Your dog drinks from the toilet? Lower the toilet lid or keep the bathroom door closed. Kitchen dumpster diver? Buy a trash receptacle with a lid or place the trash can in a cupboard. Puppy chews on your shoes? Until your puppy has finished teething, keep all shoes inaccessible and give plenty of acceptable chew alternatives. So easy...no need to spend time training.

Often, changing undesirable behavior through training is preferable or even necessary for the safety of the dog, humans, and other animals. Training your dog to sit when greeting people at the door, or to wait at the front door when you open it instead of dashing outside, will prevent injuries to both humans and your dog. But with behaviors driven by fear, including aggression, it can be difficult to use management exclusively to prevent exposure to what it is the dog is fearful of such as strangers, other dogs, thunderstorms, being left alone, etc. If you want your dog to be relaxed around strangers, walk calmly when seeing other dogs, and be unconcerned

when left alone, you need to implement a comprehensive training program that includes both management and behavior modification training. A qualified canine behavior professional can work with you to create an effective management and training plan.

There is nothing wrong with choosing management alone to prevent most problem behaviors. Some people simply don't have the time to spend on time-consuming behavior modification protocols, or just don't want to make that commitment. Be aware, however, that management sometimes breaks down, especially in multi-person households...someone leaves the baby gate open, forgets to put their shoes out of reach, doesn't close the lid on the trash can, etc....and then all bets are off!

Here are a few management ideas for some common behavior problems (remember...training options to change behavior, while not listed, are available!):

BEHAVIOR: Jumping when greeting people. **MANAGEMENT:** In the home, confine your dog behind a baby gate, in a closed room, or crate...or have your dog on a leash to prevent contact with guests. On walks, ask people not to approach your leashed dog.

BEHAVIOR: Countersurfing. **MANAGEMENT:** Keep all food off countertops; when your dog realizes that food is *never* on the counters, no matter how many times he checks, the behavior will begin to decrease. When prepping food for meals or after-meal clean-up, use a baby gate or crate to keep your dog out of the kitchen, and/or give your dog a treat-filled interactive toy (e.g. a Kong, Toppl, Lickimat) to keep him occupied.

BEHAVIOR: Barking at passersby from the windows facing the street. **MANAGEMENT:** If the room is seldom used (formal living room, dining room), close off the room with a baby gate. Close blinds, drapes, rearrange furniture that provides a perch for your dog to access the view, tape wax paper (or commercial clear window film) over the windowpanes that your dog can access (still providing light but diffusing vision).

BEHAVIOR: Mild/moderate food aggression with humans or dogs in the home. **MANAGEMENT:** Feed dog in a closed room (laundry room, mud room, bathroom) separate from the other dog(s). Open the door only when certain all dogs are finished eating, remove all food bowls from the floor as they finish. If treat stuffed toys or chewies also trigger aggression they should only be available when all dogs are safely separated (baby gates, tightly closed doors, crates). If aggression is toward humans, they need to stay away during feeding times as well.

BEHAVIOR: Leash aggression toward other dogs. **MANAGEMENT:** Walk on routes, and at times of day, when it is less likely that others will be walking their dogs. If you see a human and dog approaching in the distance, turn and walk the other way, walk down a side street, or step behind

a parked car, bush, or other barrier until the other dog passes by....distracting your dog with yummy treats while blocking their vision also helps!

BEHAVIOR: Fearful of strangers. **MANAGEMENT:** Prevent strangers from approaching your dog (forcing your dog to interact with strangers in an attempt to *desensitize” him will cause him to become *more* fearful, not less!). Your goal is to help your dog feel safe by increasing distance between he and what he fears.

BEHAVIOR: Storm/noise phobia. **MANAGEMENT:** Speak with your veterinarian about administering a sedative to your dog in anticipation of a thunderstorm (follow the radar on a weather app). Sileo is a medication often prescribed and used successfully with dogs suffering from storm anxiety/noise phobia. Create a safe, quiet, comfortable place for your dog to retreat during a storm, preferably in a windowless room (laundry room, bathroom) with a comfy bed, blanket, low light, soft music, some lavender incense, and anything else you can think of that will help your dog remain calm and comfortable...including you!

BEHAVIOR: Isolation distress. **MANAGEMENT:** Discuss medications commonly prescribed for separation/isolation distress with your veterinarian. Never leave your dog alone...utilize friends, family, dog sitters, day care, take your dog to work.

Exercise and enrichment activities are also important management tools and should be included in management protocols for all behavior problems. Vigorous exercise and mental stimulation help to decrease stress, reduce energy levels, and produce *feel good* hormones, all contributing to decreasing undesirable behaviors.

Successful management is about preventing problem behavior without using aversive methods. Punishment may temporarily stop behavior, but will increase fear, anxiety, and possibly aggression. Get creative with your management protocols, just be sure they don't increase stress. If throwing a ball in the yard interests your dog more than barking at the dog passing by on the other side of the fence, throw the ball! While implementing management to prevent behavior can sometimes be challenging, it becomes second nature over time....and both you and your dog will be happier and more relaxed as a result.