

## Pet behavior insights for owners

By MWI Animal Health

“Why does ‘Bella’ do that?”



Communication and education from veterinarian teams can help reframe perceptions of pets' behavior. Animal health experts share their recommendations to better meet pets' needs and improve challenging behaviors.

### Common causes of pet behavior issues

Zazie Todd, PhD, of Maple Ridge, British Columbia, an honors graduate of the [Academy for Dog Trainers](#), and holder of an Advanced Certificate in Feline Behavior (with distinction) from [International Cat Care](#), lists several potential causes of behavior issues:

- Genetics
- Early life experiences
- Lack of socialization
- Lack of training

- Boredom

Todd writes the [Companion Animal Psychology](#) blog and the [Pawsitive Post](#) newsletter and calls lack of socialization "the big one," adding that puppies go through a "sensitive period for socialization" from three weeks old to about 12-14 weeks old. With kittens, the sensitive period begins at two weeks and lasts until the end of seven weeks.

Three experiences pets need

Todd says that young pets "need to have a wide range of positive experiences."

### **1. Socialization**

Typically, socialization includes careful exposure to:

- Other people of all ages
- Other pets of the same/different species and sizes
- Household objects
- Various noises — everything from the vacuum to video games to popcorn popping
- Car rides
- Leashes, harnesses, crates, and carriers

"We know that many people don't do enough to socialize their puppy," Todd says. "Finding a good puppy class (one that uses reward-based methods) can really help."

Kittens often go to new homes after their sensitive period ends. Todd adds, "However, it's still really important to continue to build on that socialization." Some veterinary practices offer regular kitten socialization events to fill this need, especially for positive exposure to veterinary environments.

### **2. Training**

"Pets don't come into our home already knowing how to behave; we need to teach them," Todd says.

"Since research shows that aversive methods (such as leash corrections, shock and prong collars) have [risks to dogs' welfare](#), it's important to train with reward-based methods only. Taking a class or having a private session with a reward-based dog trainer can help a lot."

### **3. Enrichment**

As the author of *Wag: The Science of Making Your Dog Happy* (March 2020) and *Purr: The Science of Making Your Cat Happy* (May 2022), Todd explains that boredom also plays a role in some pet behavior problems. "If you have a dog breed from a working line or a cat who is indoors-only, it's especially important to provide extra exercise and enrichment; but any pet can get bored," Todd says.

"In these cases, [food puzzle toys](#), positive reinforcement training, leash walks for kitties, or on- or off-leash walks for dogs (according to leash laws), dog classes such as nose work, play sessions with you

(including play with the wand toy for your cat), can all really help give your pet some physical and mental exercise."

### **Educational resources for the new pet owner**

Offer clients reputable consumer-facing pet behavior resources as well. Todd says, "I love the [Fear Free Happy Homes](#) website, which is aimed at ordinary pet guardians and has lots of useful articles."

In addition, consider keeping a small library of reputable pet behavior books for the veterinary team to read and/or to lend to clients. Todd recommends the following titles:

- *The Trainable Cat* by John Bradshaw and Sarah Ellis
- *CatWise* by Pam Johnson-Bennett
- *The Cat Personality Test* by Lauren Finka
- *Dog Sense and Cat Sense* by John Bradshaw
- *Decoding Your Dog* and *Decoding Your Cat* by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists
- *Doggie Language* by Lili Chin
- Dog training books by Jean Donaldson, Patricia McConnell, and Pat Miller

Look into accessible online courses as well, both for clients and veterinary team members who want to learn more about everything from jumpy/mouthy puppies and house-training on through leash manners and cooperative care.

Todd recommends:

- [Dog Training 101](#)
- [Kristi Benson Dog Training](#)
- [Doggy Geeks University](#)
- [My Fantastic Friend](#)

Remember, there are no silly questions. Your veterinarian can advise you on what are considered "normal" pet behaviors and how to stop small issues from becoming big problems.