

## B-12 PROTOCOL FOR TREATING AND PREVENTING ATTENTION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

Many dogs and cats are very attached to their people and often solicit attention from them. The manner in which they do so can affect the manner in which the people interact with them. Pets that receive little attention from clients, those that are particularly needy for attention, or those that may never have had any guidelines set about acceptable behavior may resort to extremes to get attention.

Dogs may jump on their people, constantly nudge them, pull at their clothing, nip at them, or bark at them. Cats may scratch people, paw at them, pull their clothing, howl, pounce, or stroll up and down their person's body when that person is asleep. Sometimes pets become destructive or eliminate in inappropriate places. Both cats and dogs can learn to steal objects or knock them from forbidden surfaces if this gets them attention. Many cats scratch furniture because they know that it will result in someone chasing them.

It is important to remember that if an animal is severely needy of attention, for whatever reason, it will get that attention by any means possible. For an animal that craves attention, even negative attention is better than none. There is a parallel with children: if a kick is the only attention a young child receives, he or she will return for that kick. It is important that pets do not learn that misbehavior is the best way to satisfy their need for attention. This is particularly true for the pets that are overly anxious. These animals are not just misbehaving—they are abnormal, and negative attention can worsen their behavior. Many aggressive dogs are anxious.

The biggest obstacle in treating this mild but annoying behavioral problem is not the pet—it is our own tendency to automatically reach out and touch any animal that brushes against us. We are more likely to do this especially if our defenses are down—when we are reading a newspaper, napping, or watching television. Cats and dogs know this and take advantage of it. If the problem is bad enough to be annoying, people must be vigilant if they are to correct it.

The mode for the treatment of attention-seeking behavior is the same as for prevention. Although most attention-seeking behaviors are not dangerous, like aggression, they are annoying, and annoying behaviors prompt complaints. Annoying behaviors cause people to take their pets to shelters. It is critical to control such behaviors. Fortunately, this is not difficult.

First, people should establish a regular schedule of interaction. *Some degree of predictability is particularly important for anxious animals.* The person should focus on the pet at a regular time for at least 15 minutes twice a day. Scheduling this interaction makes it easier to do and allows both the person and the pet to look forward to it. During this time the pet could be taught obedience exercises (cats learn to fetch quite well for a food treat) or tricks (the American Humane Society has a videotape on this subject) or could be walked or encouraged to participate in aerobic exercise. The latter could be good for both the client and the pet. Some people who have treadmills can teach their larger dogs to use them. For people and pets with more sedentary style, the attention can involve grooming, massage, or petting and talking. Behavior modification exercises designed to teach a pet to sit, stay, and relax can help. It is important to tailor the type of interaction to both the person's and the pet's needs. Very young puppies and kittens have a huge requirement for

aerobic, interactive play. A walk will not meet this need, but throwing a ball or frisbee might. The exuberance of youth will turn into obnoxious attention-seeking behavior if the dog's or cat's needs are not met. Structured time for play and attention provides an outlet for the pet but also ensures that the person does not feel guilty when he or she wants some quiet, non-pet time. Play provides an opportunity to strengthen the pet-person bond. That strengthened bond, coupled with an improved understanding of the pet's needs and behaviors, will make the person more patient with the pet and more receptive to its needs. All of these should decrease the pet's need to solicit attention through inappropriate or undesirable behaviors.

Whenever the person and pet are not interacting during the scheduled times, some mechanism must be used to reinforce the pet's good behavior and discourage its undesirable behavior. If the cat or dog demands attention by using one of the behaviors described previously, the person should ignore the pet. If the pet backs off or sits down and awaits the person's attentions, the pet should be commended and petted or caressed. If the person wants to then interact extensively with the pet, that's fine; but the point is that the person should be allowed to say no without being mauled or bothered.

Regardless, do not push the pet down. If the pet does not automatically back off, slough the animal off (stand up or back up and let them fall off) and say, "No! Down." As soon as the dog backs off, have the dog sit (cats can be taught this, too, but people generally do not seem to be as interested in training cats) and say, "Good dog (cat)!" If the dog acts like a jack-in-the-box and comes back jumping, move further away and refuse to interact until the dog sits. Then repeat the reward. If the person is consistent, the pet will eventually learn. It is important that the person *not* push the pet down or shove it away using his or her feet. Dogs, especially, will interpret this as play and, rather than being corrected, will interpret the correction as fun.

Cats are very adept at getting people to play with them using their feet; every time the person moves his or her foot, the cat plays back by grabbing him or her again. It is important to stand still to dissuade the cat. If the cat persists, startle it. Use the minimum amount of startle necessary to get the animal to stop the behavior. Remember, the object is not to cause a fear or anxiety disorder. Once the cat stops the undesirable behavior, redirect its activity to a toy. Cats often nibble on their people for attention either when they are sitting in the person's lap or when the person is asleep. Any cat that does this should be unceremoniously dumped from the lap or bounced from the bed by moving the bedcovers. It is important that the cat not be able to misinterpret the person's response as play.

If these measures do not correct the behavior, it is time to intensify your response. Get an air canister (the pressurized air used to clean computers and cameras), a foghorn, or a battery-operated water pistol. Use a holster and keep the behavior modification device of choice handy. If more than one person is being victimized, everyone needs to be so equipped. As soon as the cat or dog even looks like it might push on you or swat at you, startle the animal with the air canister or the water pistol. The earlier in the sequence of the attention-seeking behaviors that interruption occurs, the better the response.

If you need to be reminded to pay close attention to the pet, sew a bell to its collar. The point of any of these devices is to startle the animal sufficiently so that it aborts the be-

havior and leaves. As soon as you see the animal again, ask it to do a more appropriate behavior and reward it.

If the pet becomes aggressive when you ask it to perform a deferential behavior (e.g., sitting), more severe problems than attention-seeking behavior exist and you should get help in dealing with them.

If the pet still persists and is not aggressive, consider banishing the animal to another, neutral room. You can effectively banish aggressive pets by removing yourself to a place they cannot go. Remember, these pets are desperate for attention, and the worst punishment that they can receive is to be deprived of the potential to get attention. Do not cuddle them or verbally reassure them that you are not a bad person while you are doing this; this only either reinforces the undesirable behavior or sends mixed signals. Do not leave them in isolation. Give them the chance to demonstrate that they have corrected the behavior. When they are good, let them out and ask them to do a more appropriate behavior (sitting or waiting for grooming) and then reward them. Remember not to let the animal out until it has stopped any inappropriate attention-seeking behaviors, including meowing and barking.

The final step is the easiest and most frequently ignored: reward the pet when it is calm. People tend to ignore these pets when they are sleeping or being good because they are so used to them being pests and do not want to disturb them. This is unfortunate because this is the perfect time to talk calmly to the pet and, if the animal is stretched out, to rub its belly or gently massage it. The pet is now doing exactly what you wish it would do more often—encourage it! Tell the animal it is terrific and give it a food treat.

Finally, for dogs, this type of appropriate behavior can be reinforced daily by requiring that the dog briefly defer to you by sitting and staying for anything it may want. This includes love, grooming, eating, going out, playing, having a leash put on, being petted, or even having a wound examined. This is an excellent start to getting a dog to take all the cues as to the appropriateness of its behavior from you. All dogs should learn this, and any dog older than 6 weeks of age can learn it quickly. Make sure that as soon as the dog's bottom does hit the ground, you tell it that it is wonderful.

#### CHECKLIST

- 1. Regular interaction schedule:  
15 minutes in the morning  
15 minutes in the evening
- 2. Correct with saying "no" and sloughing off. Redirect activity to more appropriate objects (toys).
- 3. Do not push down.
- 4. If the behavior persists, use a battery-operated water pistol, a foghorn, or an air canister. Use these judiciously and do not use a foghorn if any animal in the house is afraid of noises, if there is a young baby, or if your neighbors would be disturbed.
- 5. If the behavior still persists—banish the dog. Release and reinforce the good behavior with a command and reward the dog when it is quiet.
- 6. Reward the dog whenever it is quiet and calm.
- 7. For dogs, reinforce at all times that the dog must sit and stay for anything it wants.