

The Three Buckets of Behavior Issues in Pets and How to Address Them

A Special Interview With Dr. Lisa Radosta

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hello, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so thankful that we have board-certified veterinary behaviorist, Dr. Lisa Radosta, joining us today to give us some tips and tricks, some ideas, thoughts and discussion around how we as pet parents, guardians, may inadvertently create behavior issues, how to not do that, and what we need to be thinking about if we're struggling with animals that have some behavior concerns. So, thank you, Dr. Lisa. I know that you are in the middle of a very busy workday. I really appreciate you taking your lunch hour to share your expertise with us.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. Any chance to talk about behavior, I'm up for it every time.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, for people who may not know about your expertise, I think it could be the smallest of the specialties. I'm not sure, but I think there's maybe less than a hundred of you worldwide, if I'm correct. Tell our listeners and readers a little bit about why you wanted to go on to become a behavior specialist and why.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Yeah. So first of all, veterinary psychiatry – so, board certified veterinary behaviorists are kind of rare. There's about 100, 95 to 100 across the world and probably 85 in the U.S. that are actively practicing. So, it's about the same as the nutrition college. But the reason I wanted to go into this field, [there's] a couple of reasons. When I entered veterinary school, I knew that primary care was not my calling, but I wanted to specialize in something. I loved neurology, dermatology and behavior. I'm not a surgeon, so neurology was out. And although I loved dermatology, I truly felt like I could save the most lives, I could have the biggest impact, if I went into behavioral medicine.

And I feel like 23 years later, I graduated from vet school in 2000, 23 years later, it served to be true. I've been able to impact the lives of so many animals and pet parents who really, truly had no hope before coming here. And that is something that's our every day. People feel hopeless, and I'm here to say, "Oh my gosh, is there hope? There's all kinds of hope." So, that makes me feel really like I'm impacting people in a positive way and impacting pets in a positive way. So, good career choice for me.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And, really, you'll have endless – The number one reason animals end up at shelters is "behavior issues." You have built in lifetime work and then some cut out for you. You are an incredibly busy human because you are so passionately committed to helping as many animals as you can. When you think about the depth and breadth of the cases that you see and why pet parents call you, desperate, is it possible for you to bucket them into whys, like neglect or poor socialization or physical abuse or lack of environmental enrichment or owners that – I mean, are you able to have some general ideas of why there are so many behavior issues? You are busier, potentially, than other specialties, and why is that? We just don't speak fluent dog and cat and we're not very good at paying attention? What are some underlying whys about why you're such a busy woman?

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

I think, first of all, you're correct that we don't speak dog and cat very well. Even people who consider themselves to be educated pet parents do not speak dog and cat very well. We don't pay attention because sometimes those signs are really subtle and we miss them. But the why of behavior problems is very similar to the why of hip dysplasia. And most pet parents know what hip dysplasia is. They know what arthritis of the hips is. And when they talk to their veterinarian about arthritis in the hips, when the dog is 6 or 7 years old, let's say, the veterinarian says, "Well, [they] could have been born with the predisposition. So, it could have been inherited. Could be the food that you fed. Could be the rate of growth of your pet." Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And that is behavior problems. So, we can boil it down to three buckets.

Number one, inherited predispositions. And predispositions or predilections are not predictions, [so it] doesn't mean that your dog has to have those issues, but you can't fight DNA. That is what your dog is born with.

Number two, health and wellness. Boy do people forget that. They walk in the door and they tell me, "My pet looks good. I can tell my pet's healthy." And I'm thinking, are you telepathic? Because I've got 23 years of experience and I can't tell if your pet is healthy until I do a physical exam and I do blood work and I watch your dog or your cat walk or try to jump. So, physical wellness.

Number three, learning and experience, and that starts in utero. Isn't that mind-blowing? So, the behavior of your cat or dog is going to begin with that in utero environment. If the mother cat, if the dam or if the queen, is under physiologic stress, maybe a heavy parasite burden even, then their body is releasing extra cortisol that affects those babies as they develop, it affects their behavior later on. So, the environment that the animal is in and the learning that occurs absolutely is a major bucket.

And finally, it really falls under learning but it deserves its own category, and that's trauma. And yesterday – I do veterinary telehealth consults. So, these are vet-to-vet consults for that veterinarian's patient. So, I don't have any contact with the pet parent or the patient directly. And I got one yesterday and it was a video of this young, I'm going to say, Pointer. So, we'll change the breed. This young female Pointer, and her problem is that she barks at people on the street

and the trainer is coaching this pet parent and I'm watching the video. I don't have an opportunity to interview the pet parent. And so, the dog is lunging on a pinch collar and the trainer's telling the pet parent to correct the dog. The pet parent's jerking, this big guy's jerking on this dog until the dog starts crying. The dog is screaming out and the trainer says, "That's a good correction."

So, after your blood pressure goes down, think about the trauma of being hurt at your family member's hand. That kind of training does a huge amount of detriment to destroy the bond, the trust bond, between the dog and the pet parent, and puts the dog in a situation where she really has no choice but to make her own, often very ill-informed, decisions about how she should behave in society.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, what I'm hearing [is], of course, we can't change DNA [but] we can help cultivate experiences after birth that will build trust and foster clear communication. But DNA is a thing, and food and environment certainly is a bucket, a thing. But this last bucket – what experiences dogs and cats have had previous to us buying them, if we're buying puppies and kittens at 8 to 10 weeks of age. A lot of people think, "Well, they're 12 weeks of age. What could happen before 12 weeks?" It's shocking. So, I kind of want to start with the puppy, kitten vein first. Can you help us in a perfect environment to do all we can that doesn't guarantee anything, but certainly, if we know enough to make better decisions, we should have potentially better outcomes later on?

When we get young puppies and kittens, what should we and can we be doing to help them develop the coping skills later on in life that could minimize not only their physiologic stress, but could maximize the health of our relationship because they're well adapted to live in a stressful world? What are we doing or what aren't we doing during the baby months that we need to be thinking about as pet parents?

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Yeah, so look, we've all heard about socialization for dogs. I'm surprised I'm still hearing veterinarians recommend that puppies need to be kind of kept in a little bubble until they're 16 weeks, and [it] kind of makes me sad because we need to be exposing puppies to everything that they're going to see really as early as possible, as long as we do it safely.

So, number one, socialization for puppies. There's a great book on socialization by Marge Rogers. That is the book that every puppy pet parent needs. If you go to my website, flvetbehavior.com, and click on resources, you'll be brought to the dog page and then to the puppy page, and that will give you all the books that you need to raise your puppy up right if you're a book reader. And there are also some videos on that page as well. But socialization is really important, but you can find that information elsewhere.

Kitten socialization is really important. I was in Manhattan on vacation just this week and I saw a large fluffy cat walking on a harness down Central Park West. Oh my gosh, the cat was like the cutest ever New York kitty, just cool as a cucumber with all the horns beeping. And so, socializing, getting your pet out there, that's really important. But here's the thing that I think is really missing, people don't recognize when their pet has a problem. That's number one.

Number two, they don't seek help. The assumption that your pet will grow out of fear is ill-informed. It is very unlikely that your pet will outgrow fear without your direct action to help your dog or cat get through that fear.

So, number one, start with a positive reinforcement trainer for your dog immediately at eight weeks, nine weeks, whenever you get your dog. And you want to have that trainer look at your puppy in different situations. Is the tail down? Is the tail up? Is the puppy approaching? We want puppies who are boisterous and excited to see people and experience new things, and if that's not the case for your puppy, we could have a problem. So, we want to be really targeted and be looking for those problems.

For your kittens, I hear you in my ear, kitten pet parents saying, "What? You want me to take my cat out? What?" Yes. I want you to think about getting your cat out in a stroller or maybe on a harness. I want you to think about putting your kitty in her carrier and taking her for a car ride, so that when she's 5 or 6 and she goes to the vet, it's not really traumatic to go to the vet. And I want you to think about hiring a cat trainer. Those exist. And your cat is very smart. Just because she doesn't want to do what you want her to do doesn't mean she's not smart. It means she's very smart. There are lots of cat trainers that work via the computer. It's a very effective way to train a kitty, and they can work with you to help you to understand your cat's body language and help keep your new kitten from becoming that fearful cat that hides under the bed when you have visitors or when you have to go to the veterinarian's office.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But all of these really important concepts, we need to be thinking about this before we adopt or purchase a kitten or a puppy, because these opportunities – these animals are developing by the day. They're developing and their experience [is] baked by the day. So, part of this is us just being proactive, logical planners. Does it feel to you like the vast majority of time – do you get any – you probably get some proactive pet parents saying, "Listen, I've been through something or I see other animals, I don't want that. I want an animal that is enjoying life, that is calm amongst higher stress situations. I want an animal that doesn't exhibit anxiety or fear-based behaviors." Part of that is making a commitment to those goals prior to [the] crisis happening. As owners, we have to have the wherewithal to be able to identify that as a goal before we get the animal, because these things are happening quick[ly]. They're forming their opinions about the world pretty darn fast as little guys.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Absolutely. So, every second counts, and you can't wait. That is something that I just see kind of all too often. And so, what I want you to think about is making every single experience positive or at worst, neutral. And if you think about it that way, then you'll be on top of everything. So, if you think about what is an experience? Opening up the door, seeing a truck go by as you go to take your dog for a walk. Sniffing another dog's poop. There might be a chicken bone on the ground, there might be a cyclist, or a person with a dog, or construction. Those are all separate experiences.

We want to make sure that each and every time our pet experiences something new or different, that we are on it with something positive, whether it be playing with a toy, or giving treats, or petting, or kind of smushing and petting your dog in a way that's really comforting. It doesn't matter what it is as long as your dog enjoys it. And if you just think about it, think of how quickly a baby develops. These dogs and cats are on accelerated development compared to a human baby. So, they're in their teenage years by the time they get to about a year old. Think about that. We've compressed 13 years of life into a year. You have to be looking at every interaction really.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, almost always, it's not if there are bumps along the way. Sometimes there are unexpected traumas. Coach us through what happens when you open the door, your puppy's right there, [then] a big scary crash happens, [and] there are loud scary noises. Puppy says, "Oh my gosh, the sky is falling. I don't want to go. That was bad. I don't want that." Humans, not having the coaching skills or the pet parenting skills, will oftentimes make bad choices in that moment. Like, "We're going to do this, and we're dragging you out, and you'll get over it." Can you walk us through why we inadvertently add to the trauma that is already naturally occurring going through this life? Humans don't always make good decisions for their animals. They're beautiful people making bad decisions. Walk us through how we help our animals get over the daily micro traumas or macro trauma that can happen.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

So, let's just take that situation. I'm out there with my puppy and there's a big crash, and my puppy starts to back up into the house. The first thing I'm going to do is back up. I'm going to let my puppy have the space that they need in order to recover. Why would I do that? Because if you see a fearful response in your puppy or in your kitten, what you are really seeing is the outward effect of a neurochemical cascade that started in the brain and now has recruited the entire body. So, that's got to be eliminated. You got to let those neurochemicals go away if you want your puppy to have clear, rational thought and processing. So, I'm going to back up.

Then I'm going to distract or redirect my puppy. Play, food, anything to change the meaning of that situation [and] get my puppy's brain off of that and onto, "I don't know why you're giving me food, but it's kind of good and I kind of like it so I'm feeling better."

Then I'm going to get a baseline. How traumatic was that for my puppy? I might be able to walk right out, one and done. That is a puppy who is resilient. That is great. Or I might have a puppy who genetically is predisposed to fear. That puppy might be like, "I can't do it." At that moment, I'm going to try to lure my puppy out only because he probably has to eliminate. I need to get out. And I think sometimes we talk about things with pet parents and our recommendations are so pie in the sky that they don't even make sense. Sometimes the puppy's got to go out, so I'm going to put a treat trail on the ground. These are tiny high-value treats about 2 to 3 inches apart. That's essential because you want the puppy's head to be down and eating.

If you put the treats that's, say, 6 inches apart, and the puppy has time to lift the head and look around and remember what happened, then it's likely that, again, his body mounts the stress

response and he's backing up. So, I'm going to give him his space. I'm going to recognize something bad has happened. At least he feels something bad has happened. I'm going to redirect him immediately with something fun. I'm going to lure him to get out. If he's like, "No way," then I'm going to pick him up, take him in the backyard. I'm going to just do an alternate route. Take him out the garage door, do whatever I have to do in order to help him eliminate to keep my house training going, and then I'm going to seek help from a positive reinforcement trainer.

All too often people kind of drag their dog along. And this is what I think is so hysterical and sad at the same time: We expect of our dogs something entirely different than we expect of ourselves. I avoid things that scare me unless they're absolutely necessary for me to be successful or to reach my goals. I don't go on rollercoasters. I don't like that. I don't drink beer. I don't like the taste of beer. I don't eat meat. I make all kinds of decisions for myself. Yet, I would hold my dog to the standard of "You're scared? You better face your fears. Get out there. Face your fears." I don't do that with everything. I make a decision. Is that really important? Not really. So, I'll just avoid it. Why not? I'm just as happy without that thing. So, I want to make sure people put themselves in their dog or cat's paw prints and say, "Is this an important thing for my dog or cat's wellbeing?"

Dr. Karen Becker:

And I also think that oftentimes people, as humans, think OK that was a scary – Like a weed whacker sound all of a sudden started up. That's scary, and in our brain, we're like, "Oh, sweetie, it's a weed whacker. It's going to be okay, and we'll just pull you right along." I think it's stopping and having enough respect for another species who doesn't know it's a weed whacker to just recognize, "OK, there's clearly fear." And just as I would want someone else to stop and recognize fear in me and not continue to push me to do something I don't want to do. I think it kind of boils down to honoring a fear response. Even if we don't think as humans and pet parents [that] it's justified or rational, it's really not about us. It's just extending enough courtesy to recognize they're having a fear response. Seems a little over exaggerated, but that's not for us to judge. It's still going on.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Right. It's empathy versus sympathy for those Brené Brown followers. So, you know how we have learned, at least I have learned [in], I'm going to say, maybe in the past five years, more about empathy. How I might've said to my best girlfriend five or six years ago if she said, "I'm feeling really depressed today." I might've said, "Yeah, but you have a wonderful son and he's a beautiful, beautiful young man," and "You've done such a good job with him," and "Oh my God, look at the silver lining." What I've learned to do is go, "That probably seems really hard. That seems really sucky. Is there some way that I can help you?" Empathy versus trying to change the way someone feels. And animals are the same.

Have empathy. It doesn't matter if you as the pet parent think it's [not] scary, it's entirely irrelevant because your dog thinks it's scary or your cat thinks it's scary. So, we're going to honor that, and then we're going to help your pet. If it is important for their quality of life, we're going to help them to overcome that fear, and we're going to set aside our unrealistic expectations of

our pets. Boy is that a hard one. And I've posted a lot on our social media accounts about that because getting people to accept the pet they have, that's hard.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But we all know what it feels like to feel pushed. We all know what it feels like for someone to do things that you don't want to do. We all know what it feels like to have that pressure that is not pleasant. If you combine that with fear and or a physical punishment, it's wildly confusing. But I think most importantly, there's no more trust. You live with people that you love, but you don't trust them. Can you speak a little bit about how darn damaging it is when we break trust with our animals and how easy we may be doing that and not knowing it?

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Yeah. So, I want to be clear because the people that bring their pets to me are wonderful people, and I want to always be careful because they wouldn't be here if they didn't love their pet.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Exactly.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

It's not that I would imply that these people that come to see me or that are listening now don't love their pet. It's not that I'm implying that your pet doesn't love you. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that there are different levels or buckets, as we say, of trust. "Do I trust that you will put food in my bowl every day? I trust that. Yes, you do it every day. You're so reliable. Do I trust and believe that you're going to give me some of your eggs in the morning? I believe it. Yes. Do I trust and believe that you'll protect me when I'm on a walk and another dog approaches me? No, I don't trust and believe." So, there are different areas of trust. There are different levels of trust.

And so, these bits, these experiences, where dogs and cats are in frightening situations and we force them, causes them to deteriorate trust in that situation. And what generally happens is they begin to act out in the only way they know how, which is very often aggression. Very, very often. And that ends up being a situation where you are finally seeking help, kind of at the end of the ladder, let's say. And you're seeking help, but the dog or cat is so far gone [that] now the treatments have to be more kind of aggressive. Whereas if we saw the pet when they first showed those signs of fear before the trust was broken down, we'd have a lot easier time treating them, if that makes sense.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It makes total sense to me. But then kind of fleshing that out – So first of all, what I'm hearing you say is the second that you can see your animal exhibiting signs of fear or concerning behavior where they're starting to react or they've got some anxiety, something happened where

you're like, "Well, I don't like that." Address it then, because the pattern hasn't been so ingrained that the fixes, the solutions, could be easier and faster if done quicker. I hear that.

And then let's talk a little bit about [what] you said — if we wait where now there's some habituated behaviors, we can make bad choices. When you say we kind of have to match the aggressiveness with our responses. Let's talk about how sometimes, unfortunately, it is human nature when we see something annoying to want to physically stop it. And sometimes that involves physical touch in a way that is extra scary to animals. Swatting, spanking, newspapers, jerking, screaming — those are all oftentimes effective tools that maybe we as kids were trained and we didn't like it. And yet, it's in our wheelhouse of reactive responses to anything that bugs us or is annoying us, like a 6-month-old puppy who's like a largemouth bass on a leash. We don't really look at how we're choosing to manage those situations. Will you talk a little bit about what happens when we start meeting bad behaviors with our own bad training behaviors? Because it doesn't go anywhere good.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

It doesn't go anywhere good. And if you're aggressive, your pet's going to be aggressive. I mean, it's just simple. It's not the reverse. Animals who are aggressive are only living in families who are aggressive. I don't want people to take on guilt. Guilt is not helpful. Just don't even go there. It's not helpful. However, what I want people to understand is that the most scientifically valid, the most successful way of teaching your pet, is via positive reinforcement. And you know that because that's what you respond to as well. And I also want to say, you know what? It's normal to be frustrated. Can we just normalize that? I am not always the perfect mom to my human child. Sometimes I raise my voice. Of course I get frustrated. But that can't be our only way that we interact with animals. That's number one.

Number two, there's never a time where hitting, yelling, putting a pinch collar [or], God forbid, putting a shock collar on an animal is ever okay. It's not. And I know you're desperate, and I know you're being sold a lot of information from unreliable sources telling you that this is the way. But what we know from studies, from my clinical work also, but from studies that are accessible and absolutely out there, able for you to get your hands on pretty easily, is that those methods will make fear, anxiety, stress and aggression worse. And I want you to also think about unlearning. So, I just saw a lovely, lovely Shih Tzu who is aggressive toward the other dog in the home. And, really, the Shih Tzu is aggressive because she's anxious. The other dog is a barker. And this particular little dog was like, "You need to stop barking." And every time she would say that, bark at the other dog, the other dog wouldn't stop barking.

And so now over the past four years that they've lived together, the Shih Tzu has gone to biting the other dog. "You have to stop barking." She's yelling, "You have to stop barking." So, what the pet parent says to me today is, "Okay, yeah, let's stop this." I'm like, "Okay, well, you can't unlearn something." So, if you know what two plus two is four, you know that, that is your thing in your head. Go ahead, Dr. Becker, I want you to unlearn it. I'll give you a second. Just erase it from your memory, will you? No. You don't unlearn.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's impossible to do. Impossible.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Right. So, what do you do? You have to consider that that memory's in the dog's head. Here it is, it's in the brain. You have to now create a new behavior, a new condition that's going to sit alongside that. And this is going to be so rewarding. Physically, the dog's not going to be upset. Rewarding externally, you're going to give food. This is going to be so rewarding that this little thing is going to be suppressed and [will] go away.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Diminished.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

But it's going to be there always. So, what I want is for the dog never to learn that bad thing in the first place so I don't have to condition the new response. So, going back to that little Shih Tzu, what should have happened? What should have happened when that little Shih Tzu went running at the other dog who was barking at the delivery person at the front door is for the pet parent to either distract with food or to say, "Okay, I don't know what to do right now. I'm going to pick up the phone and seek help now, from a positive reinforcement trainer, a veterinary behaviorist, someone who can help these dogs."

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, in that situation, that conversation with the behaviorist or the owner, the beautiful owner having the wherewithal, I think oftentimes pet parents totally, totally underestimate. They're like, "Oh, she's 1. She'll get over it." Not only will she not get over it, it's going to escalate to the point that it's interfering with your quality of life, of you understanding and appreciating and having a great relationship with your dog. But we have failed our dogs in not intervening earlier with bad behaviors. It's a little bit like beginning to parent your kids when they're 16. That's what happens when you start addressing behaviors at 16 months of age that you should have addressed at 4 months of age. They're a part of your puppy's personality now.

So, then we then have to pivot to this is the dog I have, that I have created. I'm partially responsible for creating these behaviors that I failed to address. And I think we got to own our own contributing factors to the dogs that we have. We are a part of their formative personality expression. And I think just owning up to that is really important. Then, as you mentioned, allowing them, letting them off the hook for having to be perfect because we allowed them to cultivate bad behaviors. We're going to have to spend the time in working on developing some coping mechanisms that allow us to have a functional relationship going forward. That's probably how you spend your entire day. But the goal would be to prevent that from happening in the first place.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

It would be, and I want to say, look, I think people should own their actions. There should be accountability. And once you recognize your accountability, let it go. Because guilt will only paralyze you. You cannot move forward with your dog or cat and help them if you are living in the past. So, go ahead, hold yourself accountable. Radically and completely accept that those things happened in the past, and you can't change what happened in the past. Unless you have a time machine, you're stuck here. So, let it go, because the people that come in my office are riddled with guilt, and that is really a soapbox for me. What they're hearing from their neighbors, what they're hearing from some dog trainers who are not good. A good dog trainer's not going to do this, but a dog trainer who's not the best is going to guilt the client. That doesn't help. Recognizing what we should not do. "Oh, that's helpful." But making someone feel bad about themselves, that is not helpful.

And a client came to me again this morning. We saw a lovely little Tibetan Terrier who has separation phobia, and these people don't leave their homes. They are prisoners. They are prisoners. And so, this pet parent said to me, "My neighbors think I'm crazy." And I said, "Well, I don't care what your neighbors think, first of all. And I think that anyone who would abandon an animal who's having a full-on panic attack is absolutely crazy. And you are not abandoning this animal. It's not acceptable that you can't leave your home, and we're going to work on that." But the kind of shaming that goes on when people try to help their pets, and the free advice, and the guilt — that needs to stop.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And I also think, to your point, that we're not all born dog trainers, but if we have a dog or a cat, by default we are training them. How we train them, inadvertently training them, conditioning responses and behaviors that we don't enjoy but we don't know that we're doing it, I think sometimes it's just recognizing that this is where I am, and now I need to make a viable plan out. I think that also goes for rescues.

So, let's talk a little bit about pivoting from "I have an animal that I could have, should have, would have done things differently if I would've known or didn't know or whatever." That's an overwhelming situation that I know your goal is to prevent. And prevention is done by being a knowledgeable advocate and recognizing the split second something happens that you can see fear, or anxiety, or panic, or a behavior that is concerning to you, address it right then. Be the most proactive pet parent you can be in terms of damage control. But what if you bring home that shelter pet and you have no idea what their background was? Is it the same approach? Is it the same approach of just figuring out, "OK, these are their triggers and these are their stressors, and they have separation anxiety or whatever," and then just begin working through that with a trained professional? Same thing?

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Yeah. It really is the same thing. And I think also, this is where expectations are really important. And look, I mean, you and I are both overachieving women, veterinarians. We know what it's like to have unrealistic expectations of ourselves. I don't know you that well, but I'm thinking that you have done just what I've done, what a lot of working moms have done, and expect something unrealistic. And that's not good for our health. It's really not good when we expect

something unrealistic from a human child or from an animal, because that sets up a situation where they're always wrong. They're just always wrong. They're always failing. What does that feel like? That hurts my heart.

And so, what we want to think about with these rescue dogs is there's going to be baggage. Come on. There's going to be some baggage. It might be minimal baggage, it might be big baggage. I don't know how big their suitcase is, but we're going to take those first kind of three months – three days, three weeks, three months, that's the general rule, when things kind of start to change. With a dog, give them three days to adjust. In three weeks, they'll probably find their voice. They didn't bark for three weeks. They'll probably start barking a little bit after three weeks. And then by three months, you pretty much have the dog or cat that you're going to have. You know their triggers by then. So, I like to, yes, bring in a positive reinforcement dog trainer early on, help them get settled in the home. Watch them walk. See, OK, they're a little fearful. Let's try this little thing in order to make sure that that stays a positive experience. And don't expect anything. Accept a companion, which is why you got the dog.

And I want to just bring up, and I know that you've seen this, I know you must've seen this. People come to you with – I'm going to just pull out Jack Russell Terrier. It could be any breed – With a Jack Russell Terrier who has problems, maybe she barks too much, maybe she's aggressive, or she's obsessed with the ball, and they say, "I don't understand. My other Jack Russell Terrier," and then fill in the blank, but it's always that they were an angel. And so, I want people to really be aware that when you go to the shelter, even though the dog looks like your previous dog, that does not mean that this dog will have a personality at all like your previous dog. So, we're starting with that kind of clean slate.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I think managing our own expectations of what the animal in front of us is capable of doing and being, and loving them wholly and completely, working on their stuff, helping to build their confidence, while letting them off the hook for having to match what our previous dog, our previous relationship, or the vision that we have in our head of what we want our relationship to be — moderating our own views while taking full and wholehearted care of the creature in front of us is I think our work as guardians.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Yeah. I feel the same. And this is something that is controversial now. What do we call ourselves? I call myself a pet parent. I have a friend who is very offended by that. I heard you use guardian. Because I do feel like I'm parenting. My pets are arrested in a toddler stage. I'm not parenting them all the way to college – they're not going to go to college – or the same way I would my daughter, but I feel like the function is the same. I teach them, I keep them safe. I provide for them. I advocate for them. I send them to school. When we need to go to school, we need to go to puppy class, we go. I advocate for them with their teachers. If I need to use a trainer, I do. I feel like it's very similar to what I do. So, I call myself a pet parent, but everyone should call themselves whatever they feel comfortable calling themselves.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And I am the same. I have learned to not get hung up in – I don't care what people call themselves. If they're committed to being the best in a relationship with another species, call yourself whatever you want. I just want to know that you're committed. And I do completely agree. I love the fact that you're providing hope to people who are desperate and feeling potentially quite hopeless about managing a situation. So, just having the knowledge and the wisdom from positive trainers, fear-free trainers and behaviorists, should give every pet parent listening to this who thinks, "My animal does have some behaviors that are annoying, frustrating, scary. I'm afraid for the safety of my dog or cat," or "This doesn't feel good" – my best take-home message from what you've shared with us today is [that] don't wait because tomorrow the behavior is still going to be there. So, what we choose to do today in terms of management or beginning a relationship with a trained professional to begin getting some tools for managing those behaviors is a step in the right direction that we have to take. And the sooner, the better.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

Yeah, for sure. The sooner, the better. And if you think something is going on with your pet, you're probably right. So, if your dog is afraid on a walk and your neighbor says, "Oh, he looks fine to me. My dog's like that." That's fine. They could say what they want, but you know your dog. If your dog's afraid, seek help. The worst that will happen is you'll get great advice from a trainer that will be able to help you in the future with your dog in some other way. The worst that could happen if you wait, is that your dog could just flat out refuse to walk outside, which lots of my patients do. They just refuse to leave the house. We don't want that for anybody.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, your generosity in sharing your wisdom, I am grateful for. I'm also grateful that you've committed your career to helping people improve their relationships with their animals. But really, ultimately, you're improving animal wellbeing and quality of life because you're helping animals, via their owners, get the tools they need to have less stress and more joy. And I'm very thankful that you are an advocate and so willing to share all of your knowledge. It makes us better pet parents. So, thank you for spending this time with us.

Dr. Lisa Radosta:

It's my pleasure. Thank you for all that you do for animals.