

3 of the Biggest Causes Behind Behavior Problems

Behavior issues are on the rise and often lead to dogs and cats losing their forever homes - a tragedy for both pets and their families. Today on day two of this special week, this veterinary behavior expert identifies the three buckets of behavior problems to bring hope to struggling owners.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today is day two of bark & whiskers Creating Healthy, Happy Pets Week 2023, and my guest is Dr. Lisa Radosta, a leader and expert in companion animal behavior for over 20 years
- Dr. Lisa is one of fewer than 100 board-certified veterinary behaviorists in the U.S.; she chose the specialty in veterinary school because she felt it was where she could have the biggest impact on the lives of pets and their humans
- In today's interview, Dr. Lisa covers topics including the three big causes behind most pet behavior problems, the importance of socialization for both dogs and cats, starting off on the right foot with a new pet, and helping pets overcome or work around their fears

Welcome to day two of bark & whiskers Creating Healthy, Happy Pets Week 2023! This week I'm focusing on the many different aspects of pets' physical, mental, and emotional well-being, and I'll be interviewing a wide range of experts in nutrition, behavior, enrichment, exercise, and physical rehabilitation.

My guest today is Dr. Lisa Radosta, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist who has made it her life's work to provide pet parents, pet care professionals, and veterinary healthcare teams with the knowledge and tools to improve the welfare of the animals in their care.

Below are some of the highlights of our discussion, but I encourage you to watch the full interview above for much more detail and information.

Veterinary Behavior Is a Small, Extremely Busy Specialty

Behavior problems in companion animals are on the rise in today's world and too often lead to very poor outcomes for both pets and their families. Thankfully, we have people like veterinary behavior expert Dr. Lisa Radosta to help guide us, and today on her lunch hour she's joining us to talk about how behavior issues are created, how to resolve or manage them, and most importantly, how to prevent them.

Dr. Lisa's specialty is one of, if not the smallest boarded specialty in veterinary medicine, so I asked her to tell us why she decided to become a behavior specialist.

"Board-certified veterinary behaviorists are kind of rare," says Dr. Lisa. "There are about 100 across the world and probably 85 in the U.S. that are actively practicing. So, it's about the same as the nutrition specialty. I wanted to go into this field for 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.

"I graduated from vet school in 2000, and 23 years later, it proved 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 an everyday thing for us. People feel hopeless, and I'm here to say, 'Oh my gosh, is there hope? There's all kinds of hope!' I feel like I'm impacting people and pets in a positive way, so it was a good career choice for me."

Dr. Lisa is an incredibly busy person thanks to her commitment to helping as many animals as she can.

The Three Big Causes Behind Behavior Problems

I asked Dr. Lisa if there are some common, widespread causes for behavior problems in pets today, such as neglect, poor socialization, physical abuse, or lack of environmental enrichment. Is it that humans don't speak fluent dog and cat, so we don't pay enough attention to their communication signals?

"I think you're correct that we don't speak dog and cat very well," Dr. Lisa replies. "Even people who consider themselves to be educated pet parents don't 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. 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 six or seven years old, let's say, the veterinarian says, 'Well, he or she could have been born with the predisposition. So, it could have been inherited. Could be the food you feed; could be the rate of growth of your pet.' Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It's much the same with behavior problems. We know them when we see them, but often we can only guess at the cause.

"So, we can boil it down to three buckets. Number one, inherited predispositions. A predisposition or predilection isn't a prediction, meaning it doesn't mean your dog absolutely will have that issue, but on the other hand, you can't fight the DNA your dog was born with.

"Number two, health and wellness. Boy do people forget that. They walk in the door and 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 blood work and watch your dog or your cat walk or try to jump.

"Number three, learning and experience, which starts in utero. Isn't that mind-blowing? So, the behavior of your cat or dog begins with the in-utero environment. If the mother cat 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 is the third bucket.

"There's also trauma, which falls under learning, but really deserves its own bucket. For example, yesterday I did a telehealth consult with another behaviorist. These are vet-to-vet consults, so I don't have first-hand contact with the other vet's client or patient. The vet showed me a video of young, female dog who barks at people on the street. A trainer is coaching this pet parent. The dog is lunging on a pinch collar and the trainer's telling the pet parent to correct the dog. The pet parent, a big guy, is jerking on this dog until the dog starts crying and screaming out, and the trainer says, 'That's a good correction.'

"So, think about the trauma of being hurt at your family member's hand. That kind of training does a huge amount of detriment to 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."

The Importance of Early Socialization

Next, I asked Dr. Lisa what we can do, as new parents of a **puppy** or kitten, to help them develop early coping skills that will prepare them to adapt to life in a stressful world.

"Well, we've all heard about the importance of socialization for dogs," she says. "I'm surprised, but I'm still hearing veterinarians recommend that puppies be kept in a little bubble until they're 16 weeks. It makes me sad, because we need to be safely exposing puppies to everything they're going to experience in real life as early as possible."

*"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, **Florida Veterinary Behavior Service**, 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 you'll need to raise your puppy up right. There are also some videos on that page as well."*

"Kitten socialization is also 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. So, socializing, getting your pet out there, that's really important."

Starting Off on the Right Paw With Your New Pup or Kitten

In Dr. Lisa's experience, the number one thing people miss when it comes to pet behavior problems, is actually recognizing there's a problem.

"Number two, they don't seek help," she says. "The assumption that your pet will outgrow fear is ill-informed, and very unlikely to happen without your direct action to help your dog or cat get through that fear. Start with a positive reinforcement trainer for your dog at eight or nine weeks of age or as soon as you bring the pup home. You want to have that trainer look at your puppy in different situations. Is the tail down or up? Is the puppy approaching? We want puppies to be boisterous and excited when they 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 in looking for those problems."

"Now, I hear you in my ear, kitten pet parents, saying, 'What? You want me to take my cat out?' 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 five or six and goes to the vet, it's not a traumatic experience. And I want you to think about hiring a cat trainer. 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 understand your cat's body language and keep your new kitten from becoming that fearful cat who hides under the bed when you have visitors or when you have to go to the veterinarian's office."

In my view, prospective pet parents should be thinking about all these issues before they actually bring a new puppy or kitten home. Young animals grow and develop each and every day, so proactively planning ahead is really important.

"Absolutely," says Dr. Lisa. "Every second counts and you can't wait. I want you to think about 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. 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 different kinds of experiences."

"We want to make sure that each and every time our pet experiences something new or different, we are on it with something positive, whether it be playing with a toy, or giving treats, or petting, or holding 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. Think of how quickly a baby develops; young dogs and cats are on accelerated development compared to a human baby. They're in their teenage years by human standards by the time they get to about a year old. We've compressed 13 years of life into a year. That's why you have to be looking at every interaction."

Helping Pets Navigate Fear-Inducing Situations

I asked Dr. Lisa to walk through how we help our animals get through the daily micro and macro traumas that can occur.

*"Let's say I'm taking my puppy outside and there's a big crashing noise and he starts to back up into the house," she explains. "The first thing I do is also back up to give him the space he needs to recover. If you see a **fearful response** in your puppy or 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. You have to let those neurochemicals subside so your pup can regain clear, rational thought processing."*

"So, I'm going to back up, then I'm going to distract or redirect him. Play time, food, anything to change the dynamics of the situation and switch his brain to something positive, such as, '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.'"

"Next, I'm going to get a baseline. How traumatic was that for my puppy? I might be able to walk right back out with a pup who is resilient. Or I might have a puppy who is genetically predisposed to fear and can't walk right back out the door. In that case, I'm going to try to lure him out only because he probably has to eliminate, so I'm going to put a treat trail on the ground. These are tiny high value treats about two to three inches apart. That's essential because you want the puppy's head to be down and eating. If he has time to lift his head and look around and remember what happened, then it's likely his body will mount another stress response and he'll back up again.

"So, I'm going to give him his space. I'm going to recognize that he feels something bad has happened, and I'm going to redirect him immediately with something fun. If it's still a no-go, I'm going to pick him up and take him into the backyard by an alternate route, like out the garage door. I'll do whatever I have to do in order to help him eliminate to keep my housetraining going, and then I'm going to seek help from a positive reinforcement trainer."

Dr. Lisa makes the point that we often expect of our dogs more 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," she says. "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 with my dog, I think, 'You're scared? You better face your fears. Get out there. Face your fears.' We don't do that to ourselves. We make decisions. Is this thing I fear or dislike really important? If not, I'll just avoid it. Why not? I'm just as happy without that thing. I want to make sure people put themselves in their dog or cat's place and ask the question, 'Is this an important thing for my dog or cat's wellbeing'?"

"Have empathy. It doesn't matter if you think something's 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. And boy, is that a hard one. I post a lot on social media, encouraging people to accept the pet they have."

Something that Dr. Lisa wants all pet parents to understand is that the most scientifically valid and successful way to train your pet is through positive reinforcement.

"There's never a time where hitting, yelling, using a pinch collar or God forbid, a shock collar on an animal is okay," says Dr. Lisa. "It's not. 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. What we know from studies is that those methods will make fear, anxiety, stress, and aggression worse."

If you've made mistakes with your pet, and who hasn't, it's important to own your actions and be accountable, but then let it go.

"Guilt will only paralyze you," says Dr. Lisa. "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 and accept what happened in the past, then let it go."

Managing Your Expectations

I asked Dr. Lisa about bringing home a shelter pet whose background is a mystery.

"This is where expectations are really important," she says. "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 always failing. What does that feel like? It hurts my heart."

"What we want to think about with rescue dogs is that there's going to be baggage. That's a given. It might be minimal baggage; it might be big baggage. So, we're going to give them the standard three days to adjust. In three weeks, they'll probably find their voice and start barking a bit. By three months, you pretty much have the dog or cat that you're going to have. You know their triggers by then. Bring in a positive reinforcement dog trainer early on to help them get settled in their new life. And don't expect anything but a companion, which is why you got the dog."

Dr. Lisa also stresses that we shouldn't expect, say, our second Jack Russell Terrier to behave like our first one. Dogs are individuals, and humans need to manage their expectations!

If you'd like to learn more about Dr. Lisa, you can visit her at her practice website linked above, at **Dr. Lisa Radosta**, on **Facebook**, or **Instagram**.
