

Questionnaire: Behavior Issues

Behavior issues are so varied that it would be impossible to present one comprehensive questionnaire. But whether the issue is mild or severe, the following questions will provide a good starting point. The answers you receive should, of course, be interpreted in conjunction with responses from other questionnaires.

Can you describe the behavior?

Be sure to get a specific description of what the dog *does*, rather than accepting the owner's assessment of the dog's motives or internal state. "The dog freaks out when we're gone" is not especially helpful. Knowing that the dog shreds a specific family member's laundry or claws grooves in the front door when left alone is solid information. You may have to calmly and repeatedly steer owners away from emotional observations to extract concrete, useful information.

Exercise: Observation

Purpose: to understand how difficult it can be to stick to facts when describing canine behavior.

This exercise involves observing dogs' body language as they interact with each other. You will need either a store-bought or home-made videotape that shows dogs interacting, or access to Animal Planet™ or a dog-related television program. Watching live interaction is fine as a last resort, but it is best if you can replay the action. As you watch the dogs interact, write down everything you see them *doing*. "The dog turned away from the other dogs, tucked his tail and ran into a crate in the corner" would be an objective observation. Saying the dog was "afraid of" or "uncomfortable with" the others would be assigning emotion. When I participated in this exercise at a seminar for trainers, I was surprised that so many trainers gave subjective, rather than objective, reports on the dogs' behavior. Practicing this exercise will improve your observational skills, help you to get clients to stick to the facts, and increase your empathy when a client has difficulty being objective!

What would you like the dog to do instead?

Instead of jumping on visitors, a dog could sit to be greeted; instead of begging for food at the dinner table, he could lie quietly on his bed. It is necessary for you and the owner to reach agreement as to what the dog *should* do, so that training can be properly focused. Considering this question is also a useful exercise for the owner, as it encourages the habit of seeking out proactive solutions rather than simply complaining about problems.

When did the behavior first manifest?

There is a big difference between a three-year-old dog whose housebreaking issue has been present since puppyhood, and one whose problem surfaced recently. The former could indicate that the owner has never bothered to address the problem until now (you can bet there's new carpeting involved), while the latter could indicate a medical or stress-related issue. There are many situations in which the answer to this question can lead to information that is crucial to solving the dog's problems.

Knowing how long a dog has been displaying a behavior can also give you an idea of how difficult that behavior might be to modify. A seven-year-old dog who has lunged and barked at other dogs on walks since puppyhood is sure to present more of a challenge than an eight-month-old pup who is just beginning to show those behaviors.

Were there any changes in the household at the time the behavior first manifested?

Sometimes the presentation of a dog's behavior issues coincides with the addition or loss of another pet or family member. Sometimes a change in the owner's daily schedule affects the amount of attention or exercise the dog gets, which in turn contributes to behavior issues. A behavior change might even be related to something one would not normally consider, such as the dog being stressed due to work being done on the house, loud construction work in the neighborhood, or new neighbors moving in next-door. Ask the owner whether she can recall any circumstances that might be related.

How often does the behavior occur?

It is important to get solid data about how often a problem behavior occurs, rather than accepting the subjective description of the owner. “It’s gotten pretty bad” does not give as much information as, “He darts out the door one out of every two times it is opened for a visitor.” Terms such as “pretty bad” are, of course, subjective. While one owner of a ten-week-old pup might consider the pup’s daily accidents on the living room carpet to be understandable, another might find such frequent housebreaking accidents unacceptable to the point that the pup is in danger of losing his home. In accepting the subjective evaluation of these two owners, without asking how often the behavior occurred, you might get an erroneous idea of the severity of the problem. The answer to this question can open the door to a discussion of normal versus abnormal canine behavior, and what should and should not be acceptable.

Consider the importance of knowing how often a behavior occurs in a situation where budding aggression is involved. One owner might consider the adolescent dog’s snapping at the children on a regular basis to be a puppy-like nuisance rather than a serious issue, while another will call for help immediately after the first incident. If you do not respond to a comment such as, “The dog snaps at the kids” by asking how often the behavior occurs, you might not make an accurate assessment of the severity of the problem.

Under what specific circumstances does the behavior occur?

In what location does the behavior occur?

Who is present when the behavior occurs?

This trio of questions can help to hone in on critical details. Knowing that a dog is “possessive” is not specific enough. Does the dog guard specific items? Does he guard only in a specific location, such as on the bed? Does he guard from a specific person, or from people in general? Does the behavior occur in the mornings or evenings?

“The dog is aggressive toward people.” Again, this statement is not specific enough. Does the dog growl at people only on walks, or in the home as well? What does he physically *do* besides growl? Is he reactive only when being walked by a specific person? These are just a few of the many questions that should be asked. (See *Aggression Issues* for a full questionnaire.) Regardless of the problem, the more detailed, specific information you get, the greater your chance of resolving the issue.

Has the frequency of the behavior increased, decreased, or remained the same?

Has the intensity of the behavior strengthened, weakened, or remained the same?

A dog who has growled at the kids twice in his entire life, is now growling at them twice daily—that change in frequency is crucial information. If a home-alone dog used to shred laundry items now and then but is now destroying everything in his path, that change in intensity is significant. These increases in intensity and frequency alert trainers to look for contributing factors. And although you might think the answer “it’s lessened” is unlikely, sometimes an owner has already attempted a solution that is beginning to help.

When was the most recent incident?

The answer to this question, in conjunction with the two previous questions, will form a clearer picture of what you are dealing with and the acuity of the problem. Get as much detail as possible about the most recent incident, along with detailed descriptions of previous incidents.

What prompted you to seek help at this time?

Depending on the nature of the issue, the answer to this question could be anything from, “Because he bit our child” to, “We’re getting a new couch and we don’t want him destroying it.” You might be surprised at the information this question uncovers; it is always worth asking.

What has been done so far to address the problem?

The answer to this question can contain extremely valuable information. If the dog has an aggression issue, and punishment-based methods have been employed to “fix” the problem, it is very possible that the problem has worsened. And although the owners have called you for help, they may still be using the punishment-based methods, for lack of better options. This is your chance to educate and offer better solutions. If the owners have been on the right track and simply need a bit of direction, that is your opportunity to positively reinforce them for what they have been doing, and to help modify their approach.

You will hear all manner of replies to this question, ranging from perfectly reasonable solutions that simply did not work with a particular dog, to truly horrendous tactics that make you want to shout, “What idiot told you to do *that*?!” Whatever the answer, remain neutral and do not lay blame, lest you offend and thereby lose your opportunity to improve the situation for both dog and owner.

How much time and effort are you willing to spend on resolving this issue?

Have you considered the options, should the issue not be solvable?

These questions come into play most often with serious behavior cases. While I would not expect the owner of a Beagle who is getting into the laundry hamper to answer, “If that darn dog steals one more bra, he’s out of here!” it would be reasonable for the owner of a dog who is biting visitors to seriously consider her options.

It is important for you to know your client’s commitment level before proceeding with any behavior modification program. You might find that while one family member is dedicated to keeping the dog at any cost, another has reached the end of the proverbial rope; if you don’t “fix” the problem quickly, the dog will lose his home and possibly his life. In cases where families are divided, you might find that one person follows your instructions, while another sits back and waits for the dog to make that final mistake. This scenario is doomed from the start. You must get an acceptable level of commitment from *all* family members before embarking on any behavior modification program. Stress the importance of that commitment in making the program successful. Ensure that each person understands how much time and effort will be involved, and how long it might take to begin seeing results.

If agreement and commitment to the program is not possible, discuss options. Some owners have not let themselves consider what would happen, should the dog’s problems not be solvable. That is understandable, as those choices can be extremely difficult. Depending on the dog’s issues, options might include management, rehoming (or rescue) or euthanasia. Give owners a realistic overview of each option. (For a discussion of euthanasia, see *Miscellaneous Questions*.)