

## Pet Owners' Views of Pet Behavior Problems and Willingness to Consult Experts for Assistance

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Prior research has found that dog obedience training and the receipt of advice regarding companion animal (pet) behavior reduce the risk of nonhuman animal relinquishment to an animal shelter and increase human-companion animal interactions, but research also finds that only a minority of pet guardians participates in such activities. The researchers for this study asked 170 dog and cat guardians to assess the seriousness of common problem behaviors and how likely they were to seek help. The researchers also asked them to rate different methods of obtaining expert advice. The dog and cat guardians saw behaviors directly affecting humans as most severe; those involving the destruction of property were next in severity; and those affecting the animal more than the human were least severe. There were no significant differences in ratings by participants' gender or income. Participants indicated they were more likely to use free help options than fee-based services. The lack of a clear correlation between the seriousness of a behavior problem and likelihood of seeking help suggests that other factors may play a role in pet guardians' interest in obtaining expert advice.

Research spanning several decades demonstrates that guardian (owner)-perceived behavior problems place cats and dogs at increased risk of relinquishment to a shelter for nonhuman animals. Arkow and Dow (1984) found dog

behavioral problems to be a predominant reason for relinquishment at 13 U.S. shelters, accounting for more than 26% of the dogs surrendered. Behavior was cited in 30% of dog relinquishments and 14% of cat relinquishments among 130 owners surveyed at an Ohio humane society (Miller, Staats, Partlo, & Rada, 1996). Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, and Ecker (1996a, 1996b) compared households that had relinquished dogs or cats with a control group of dog-or cat-owning households. Behavior problems were found to increase the risk of relinquishment for both species, the risk rising with increasing frequency of the behaviors. The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy's Regional Shelter Study collected information from 12 shelters in four regions of the United States (New et al., 2000; Salman, et al., 1998, 2000). The more than 3000 relinquishers interviewed gave 71 reasons for relinquishing; 24 of these were classified as behavioral, with at least 1 behavioral problem cited for 40% of dogs and 28% of cats. A study of dogs in three Melbourne, Australia, shelters found that 14% of the dogs had been relinquished for dog behavior or aggression (Marston, Bennett, & Coleman, 2004). Pet behavior is also a factor in the return of recently adopted animals. Shore (2005) found that pet behavior accounted for more than one third of the reasons given for returning dogs or cats to the shelter from which they had been adopted.

Obedience training and behavioral counseling may be one way to reduce the relinquishment of companion animals displaying behaviors their guardians find objectionable. Patronek et al. (1996a) found that risk of dog relinquishment to an animal shelter was reduced among owners who had received behavior advice they considered very helpful and among owners who had participated in training activities after acquiring the dog. Clark and Boyer (1993) and Jagoe and Serpell (1996) reported that obedience training was associated with reduced prevalence of selected behavior problems reported by dog owners.

The potentially beneficial effects of obedience classes, expert advice, and behavioral counseling can, of course, be attained only if pet owners choose to avail themselves of such options. Coren (1999) reported that only 24% of people participate in formal obedience classes. Relinquishers in a study by DiGiacomo, Arluke, and Patronek (1998) reported tolerating the animal's behavior or looking for a new home for the pet but often stated that they had neither the time nor the money to invest in training. Bennett and Rohlf (2007), who found that training engagement was negatively correlated with a number of behavior problems and positively correlated with the owners' involvement in shared activities with their pets, also noted that slightly more than 40% of the "committed owners" in their study had never attended formal obedience training. The authors point out that although it seems logical to assume that those with problem dogs would engage in training activities, it may be that owners with well-behaved dogs might be more likely to do so because the activity would be more pleasant for them. Such findings point to the need to understand pet owners' views of their pets' behavior and ways to address behavior

problems. The purpose of the current study was to investigate cat and dog owners' assessments of the seriousness of common pet behavior problems and the likelihood that they would ask for help with these problems. Owners were also asked their opinion of a variety of options for obtaining expert advice or assistance with the behavior.

## METHOD

Eighty-five cat owners and 85 dog owners were recruited from among visitors at an open-admissions Humane Society shelter in a moderately sized midwestern U.S. city. To quickly distinguish themselves from shelter staff, the interviewers wore names tags indicating they were from a local university. The interviewers approached people looking at animals available for adoption, introduced themselves, and explained that they were conducting a research study. The visitors were asked whether they already had a pet dog or cat at home. The interviewers briefly described the study to those who had pets, stated that the interview took between 5 and 10 minutes, and asked if they would like to participate. Those who agreed were shown to an office supplied by the shelter for the interview. Participants with both dogs and cats were asked to choose to respond to questions about dogs or about cats.

Dog owners were asked to rate 13 problem behaviors; cat owners rated 9. Each list (Tables 1 and 2) is comprised of frequently given behavioral reasons for relinquishment, as reported in a variety of studies (Miller et al., 1996; New et al., 2000; Patronek et al., 1996a, 1996b; Salman et al., 2000). The participant was asked to rate each behavior in terms of the severity of the problem ("Would you consider this a problem?"), and the likelihood that the person would ask for advice ("How likely would you be to ask for advice or help from an expert?"). Participants were handed a sheet that presented each question, followed by a scale of numbers ranging from 1 to 10. Both ends were anchored with a short phrase, such as *Not a problem at all* and *A very serious problem*. The problem behaviors were presented verbally, in random order. Randomization was attained through the use of a computerized random number generator (Research Randomizer; <http://www.randomizer.org>).

In the second part of the survey, the interviewers presented 12 services that could be used to obtain assistance with a behavior problem. The 12 (Table 3) included free and for-pay services. Participants were asked, "How likely you would be to use the following services?" As with the behavior problems, participants were handed a sheet that presented the rating visually, again on a scale of 1 (*Never would*) to 10 (*Definitely would*). In order to make the free versus for-pay distinction clear, these services were not presented in random order.

TABLE 1  
Dog Owners' Mean Ratings of Behaviors: Seriousness and Likely to Ask  
for Advice From an Expert

Item	Seriousness <sup>a</sup>		Ask for Advice <sup>b</sup>	
	M	SD	M	SD
The dog is aggressive toward people, growling and/or biting.	9.23	1.7	7.62	3.2
The dog doesn't get along with your children, or the children are afraid of the dog.	8.65	2.6	7.54	3.3
The dog escapes from the house or yard.	8.38	2.1	5.62	3.5
The dog is aggressive toward other dogs or cats.	7.96	2.3	6.75	3.3
The dog does not get along with your other pets.	7.89	2.6	6.42	3.6
The dog chews furniture, shoes, or other things in the house.	7.79	2.5	6.65	3.2
When no one is home, the dog gets upset and destructive.	7.28	3.0	6.73	3.4
The dog destroys things in the yard or garage.	7.12	2.6	6.13	3.3
The dog is not completely housebroken and sometimes urinates or defecates (pees or poops) in the house.	6.81	3.0	5.89	3.5
The dog is disobedient, doesn't listen.	6.78	2.7	6.42	3.3
The dog barks a lot.	6.51	2.6	6.56	3.1
The dog is hyper, running and jumping too much.	5.09	2.8	5.56	3.4
The dog is afraid of people, storms, or loud noises.	4.12	2.7	5.87	3.5

<sup>a</sup>Seriousness: 1 (*not a problem at all*) to 10 (*a very serious problem*). <sup>b</sup>Likely to ask for advice or help from an expert: 1 (*not at all likely*) to 10 (*extremely likely*).

Finally, participants were handed a sheet presenting four demographic questions (age group, current living arrangement, race/ethnicity, annual household income group) and listing categories within each. For each question, they were asked to provide the number of the category that applied to them.

## RESULTS

Most of the 170 participants were female (128; 75.3%); almost all (154; 90.6%) were White; and most all were in their 20s (30.2%) or 30s (27.8%). Participants were given a list of seven household- income groupings, from less than \$20,000 per year to greater than \$75,000 per year, and asked to indicate which group applied to them. Incomes were relatively evenly spread, and no group dominated. The largest number reported annual incomes greater than \$75,000 (41, 24.6%) or between \$30,000 and \$40,000 (39; 23.3%).

TABLE 2  
 Cat Owners' Mean Ratings of Behaviors: Seriousness and Likely to Ask  
 for Advice From an Expert

Item	Seriousness <sup>a</sup>		Ask for Advice <sup>b</sup>	
	M	SD	M	SD
The cat sprays in the house.	8.79	2.1	8.01	3.2
The cat is aggressive toward people.	8.24	2.3	7.59	3.1
The cat doesn't always use its litter box and sometimes urinates or defecates (pees or poops) in the house.	8.07	2.3	7.82	2.9
The cat damages or destroys things by scratching, biting, or chewing.	7.28	2.6	7.24	3.2
The cat does not get along with your children, or they are afraid of the cat.	7.22	3.2	7.51	2.9
The cat is aggressive toward other cats or dogs.	6.61	2.7	7.31	3.1
The cat does not get along with other pets.	6.18	2.9	6.86	3.2
The cat is not friendly.	6.04	3.0	6.34	3.2
The cat is timid or fearful or spends a lot of time hiding.	4.84	2.7	6.38	3.2

<sup>a</sup>Seriousness: 1 (*not a problem at all*) to 10 (*a very serious problem*). <sup>b</sup>Likely to ask for advice or help from an expert: 1 (*not at all likely*) to 10 (*extremely likely*).

Half the respondents (cat owners) answered questions about cat behaviors and half (dog owners) answered questions about dog behaviors. Only five of the 170 participants kept only one animal; 40% of the cat owners also had dogs and 36.5% of the dog owners also had cats.

### Assessment of Pet Problem Behaviors

Tables 1 and 2 present the respondents' ratings of dog and cat behaviors, respectively. Each provides means for the seriousness of each behavior and shows the respondents' estimation of how likely they think they would be to ask for advice from an expert in dealing with the behavior. Among dog owners, aggression toward people was viewed as the most serious problem, followed by not getting along with, or frightening, the children in the family. Fear of people, storms, and loud noises was seen as least serious, with the mean falling below the halfway point on the 1 to 10 scale. This item is not the same as separation anxiety, which was described as the dog's becoming upset and destructive when no one is at home (seriousness mean = 7.28).

Among cat owners, spraying in the house was seen as the most serious problem, followed by aggression toward people, and not reliably using the litter box. As

TABLE 3  
Factor Analysis: Seriousness of Dog Problem Behaviors  
and Factor Correlation Matrix

<i>Item</i>	<i>Factor 1 Destructiveness</i>	<i>Factor 2 Unsociability</i>	<i>Factor 3 Overactivity</i>
The dog chews furniture, shoes, or other things in the house.	<b>.706</b>	-.063	-.085
The dog destroys things in the yard or garage.	<b>.632</b>	-.170	.332
When no one is home, the dog gets upset and destructive.	<b>.519</b>	.178	.058
The dog escapes from the house or yard.	<b>.511</b>	.045	-.139
The dog is aggressive toward people, growling and/or biting.	-.185	<b>.843</b>	.020
The dog doesn't get along with your children, or the children are afraid of the dog.	.072	<b>.590</b>	.028
The dog does not get along with your other pets.	.299	<b>.404</b>	-.185
The dog is hyper, running and jumping too much.	-.190	-.079	<b>.932</b>
The dog barks a lot.	.039	.312	<b>.374</b>
The dog is aggressive toward other dogs or cats.	.235	.237	-.036
The dog is disobedient, doesn't listen.	.214	.113	.226
The dog is not completely housebroken and sometimes urinates or defecates (pees or poops) in the house.	.184	.270	.273
The dog is afraid of people, storms, or loud noises.	.134	.216	.166
<i>Dog Problem Behavior Factors</i>	<i>Factor 1 Destructiveness</i>	<i>Factor 2 Unsociability</i>	<i>Factor 3 Overactivity</i>
1 Destructiveness	1.000	.532	.549
2 Unsociability		1.000	.396
3 Overactivity			1.000

with dogs, timidity and fearfulness were viewed as least serious, falling just below the halfway point on the scale. On the other hand, problems relative to the children in the family were not considered as serious as they were relative to dogs.

The seriousness data were also factor analyzed. Cattell's Scree and Kaiser-Guttman tests indicated three factors that were extracted using an iterative Principal Axis solution followed by a Promax Oblique rotation with Kaiser normalization (Gorsuch, 1983). Loadings were considered salient at .35 or above. The three dog-behavior problem factors, which accounted for 50.2% of the variance before rotation, were labeled "Destructiveness," "Unsociability," and "Overactivity" (Table 3). The three cat-behavior problem factors, which accounted for 63.4% of

TABLE 4  
Factor Analysis: Seriousness of Cat Problem Behaviors  
and Factor Correlation Matrix

<i>Item</i>	<i>Factor 1 Destructiveness</i>	<i>Factor 2 Unsociability</i>	<i>Factor 3 Timidity</i>
The cat sprays in the house.	<b>1.017</b>	.085	-.187
The cat doesn't always use its litter box and sometimes urinates or defecates (pees or poops) in the house.	<b>.540</b>	.041	.189
The cat damages or destroys things by scratching, biting, or chewing.	<b>.533</b>	-.146	.480
The cat does not get along with other pets.	-.006	<b>.738</b>	-.034
The cat is aggressive toward other cats or dogs.	.081	<b>.602</b>	-.006
The cat is aggressive toward people.	.065	<b>.478</b>	.068
The cat is not friendly.	-.152	<b>.404</b>	<b>.391</b>
The cat does not get along with your children, or they are afraid of the cat.	.034	<b>.377</b>	.261
The cat is timid or fearful or spends a lot of time hiding.	.051	.061	<b>.559</b>
<i>Cat Problem Behavior Factors</i>	<i>Factor 1 Destructiveness</i>	<i>Factor 2 Unsociability</i>	<i>Factor 3 Timidity</i>
1 Destructiveness	1.000	.265	.307
2 Unsociability		1.000	.498
3 Timidity			1.000

the variance before rotation, were labeled “Destructiveness,” “Unsociability,” and “Timidity” (Table 4). One item, “The cat is not friendly,” loaded almost equally on two factors, Unsociability and Timidity. The three dog-problem behavior factors were moderately correlated, and the three cat-problem behavior factors were relatively independent.

Male and female pet owners’ ratings were compared by discriminant analyses, using the three factors as predictors and gender as the grouping variable. There were no significant gender differences for cat or for dog owners. It should be noted that the low number of male respondents in the two samples may have affected the results. A linear regression analysis, using the three factors as predictors, yielded no significant differences for dog or cat owners by income.

Participants’ assessments of the seriousness of the problem were compared with their likelihood of asking for expert help with the problem. Among dog owners, 6 of the 13 correlations between seriousness of problem and likelihood of asking for help were statistically significant (with Bonferroni correction,  $p \leq .004$ ): Aggression toward people,  $r = .324, p = .003$ ; Escapes house/yard,  $r = .316, p =$

TABLE 5  
Ratings of Ways to Get Help With Pet Behaviors by Dog and Cat Owners

<i>Item</i>	<i>Dog Owners</i>		<i>Cat Owners</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Visit a free animal behavior Web site.	8.85	2.3	8.91	2.1
Call a veterinarian for free advice.	8.68	2.5	8.82	2.2
Buy a book on how to solve animal behavior problems.	7.76	2.8	8.06	2.1
Call an animal behavior helpline for free advice.	7.45	3.0	7.22	3.5
Call an animal behaviorist for free advice.	7.41	3.0	7.28	3.4
Call an animal shelter for free advice.	7.12	3.3	7.60	3.2
Pay for a class on solving animal behavior problems at the Humane Society.	6.85	3.0	6.25	3.2
Pay for a visit to the vet to discuss the problem.	6.75	3.3	7.47	2.6
Pay an animal behaviorist to work with you and your pet.	5.44	3.0	5.14	3.3
Pay for a class on solving animal behavior problems at a pet store like PetSmart.	5.26	3.3	5.48	3.3
Call an animal behavior helpline that charges for its services.	4.29	3.0	4.86	3.3
Visit an animal behavior website that charges for its services.	3.47	2.6	3.98	3.0

*Note.* 1 = *Never would*; 10 = *Definitely would*.

.003; Aggression toward other dogs or cats,  $r = .421, p < .001$ ; Destructive to yard or garage,  $r = .371, p < .001$ ; Barks a lot,  $r = .434, p < .001$ ; Afraid of people, storms, loud noises,  $r = .388, p < .001$ ). Among cat owners, 4 of the 9 correlations between seriousness of problem and likelihood of asking for help were statistically significant (with Bonferroni correction,  $p \leq .006$ ): Aggression toward other cats or dogs,  $r = .325, p = .002$ ; Damages or destroys things,  $r = .313, p = .004$ ; Does not get along with other pets,  $r = .426, p < .001$ ; Timid, fearful, hiding,  $r = .03, p = .001$ .

### Ratings of Ways to Get Help

Table 5 presents mean ratings of the likelihood that participants would use various ways of obtaining assistance with pet behavior problems. With a few exceptions (all participants: buying a book; cat guardians: paying for a visit to a veterinarian), all the options involving fees or payments received lower scores than did those presented as free. Visiting an animal behavior Web site was rated highest when the visit was free; adding a charge to that service resulted in the



rating dropping to last place. Calling an animal behavior helpline, rated 4th by dog owners and 7th by cat owners, dropped to 11th for both when a charge was added. There were no statistically significant differences in the ratings by gender for either cat or dog owners. Similarly, there were no differences in the ratings by lower versus higher annual income.

## DISCUSSION

The participants in this study were pet owners visiting an animal shelter in a moderately large midwestern U.S. city. Although income and age varied, almost all were White, and slightly more than three quarters were female. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with one of two female interviewers. As with other studies, these demographic and methodological factors limit the generalizability of the results.

The majority of the problems asked about were rated as quite serious. This is not unexpected, given that the behaviors were compiled from studies of common reasons owners relinquish their pets to animal shelters. The order of the ratings points to an underlying theme: how much the human is directly affected, or endangered, by the behavior. This is clearest among dog owners, where aggression and not getting along with children were rated as most serious. Behaviors characterized by destruction of property appeared next. At the bottom were fearfulness and high energy, behaviors that may not greatly affect the humans' lifestyle or require an immediate response.

A similar trend was found among cat owners' responses. Aggression toward people was second in seriousness, but animal-to-animal aggression was not as highly ranked as it was among dog owners. The inability of the cat and children to get along, or children's fear of the cat, was mid-range in the rankings. The perception that cat aggression is less serious may be related to cats' smaller size. Spraying, which received the highest mean rating, can be seen as destruction of property but also could be a problem which, by virtue of its frequency and the odor and mess produced, more immediately and directly affects the humans in the household. As with dogs, fearfulness ranked lowest.

The factor analyses provided support for the aforementioned. Among both dog- and cat-owning respondents, factors indicative of aggression and of destructiveness emerged. The third factor—timidity for cat owners and overactivity for dog owners—reflects behaviors that affect the humans less immediately or seriously.

Participants' gender and income were not related to their ratings of the seriousness of the behaviors or the likelihood that the person would seek expert assistance. The similarity in response suggests that programs to prevent or treat pet behavior problems could be equally attractive to men and women and to people of different income levels. The results for gender may have been affected by the low

number of male pet owners in the sample; further study of male and female views of pet behavior problems is needed as is additional research to confirm the other findings and to consider other human demographic variables.

As might be expected, participants indicated that they were more likely to use free help options than for-fee services. Consulting an animal behavior Web site was rated highest if the use of the Web site was without cost; adding a charge dropped this option to last place. A similar reaction to the use of a helpline suggests that pet owners may not be willing to pay for less personal assistance, even if they are comfortable with the technology involved. Respondents rated buying a book on how to solve animal behavior problems relatively highly, and some reported that they had already purchased such books. Patronek et al. (1996a) found that reading a book was not related to decreased risk of relinquishment among dog owners; however, Patronek et al. (1996b) found it was protective for cats.

The relationship between perceptions of the seriousness of a behavior problem and the person's reported willingness to seek expert help is less clear. Likelihood of seeking help was positively correlated with perceived seriousness in somewhat fewer than half of the cases, and problems for which there was a positive correlation were not necessarily the most serious ones. More research is needed to determine what leads pet owners to obtain or accept expert assistance with pet problems, as insight into such factors could result in programs to reduce relinquishment and improve human-companion animal relationships.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank the director and staff of the Kansas Humane Society for their cooperation and assistance with this project.

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