

WOODVALE PARK

VETERINARY HOSPITAL



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Unruly Behavior in Dogs

Jumping, Digging, Chasing, Stealing

Basics

OVERVIEW

- Jumping—standing on rear legs with front legs on a person or object or leaping in the air with or without landing against the person
- Digging—using paws to scrape a surface, as though attempting to excavate the underlying layer
- Chasing—pursuing a moving person, animal, or object
- Stealing—the taking of an item not intended to be utilized by the dog

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

Species

- Dogs

Breed Predilections

- Herding and hunting breeds may be more likely to chase than other breeds
- Hunting breeds (including the terrier breeds) may be more likely to dig than other breeds

Mean Age and Range

- More common in younger dogs but may occur at any age

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Jumping up on people occurs more commonly in association with arrivals or departures or greeting at other times; it also is associated with exploring the contents of countertops or tables
- Digging often occurs in areas along a fence line or areas of recent gardening, at rodent holes, and on interior flooring with or without owner presence
- Items displaced or food items missing from surfaces are common complaints in stealing
- Physical examination findings usually are unremarkable
- Nails worn down
- Pain on feeling the abdomen (known as “abdominal palpation”) may suggest an organic disease
- Nervous system examination may suggest an organic disease

CAUSES

- Jumping up is a normal greeting and play behavior; excitement, encouragement of the behavior by others, or inadvertent rewarding of the behavior perpetuates it
- Separation anxiety may result in excessive jumping on owners when returning home or leaving
- Social anxiety may cause overgreeting of visitors, with jumping

- Digging is a normal behavior; presence of rodents, anxiety, regulation of body temperature, understimulation or lack of adequate exercise, food hiding or retrieval, escape from confinement, pain (particularly abdominal), separation anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and nervous system disease can be causes of digging
- Chasing is a normal behavior; causes include herding, hunting, play, and defense
- Stealing is a normal acquisitive behavior; it can be caused by a dog trying to get an owner's attention or by the desire for a food item or an object of play

RISK FACTORS

- Inadequate exercise
- Understimulation
- Stealing food—restricted or weight-reduction diets; certain medications (such as phenobarbital, benzodiazepines, and steroids); diseases (such as increased production of steroids by the adrenal glands [known as “hyperadrenocorticism” or “Cushing’s syndrome”] and sugar diabetes [diabetes mellitus])
- Chasing—lack of exposure to fast-moving stimuli at a young age, common in herding breeds

Treatment

HEALTH CARE

- Outpatient management

ACTIVITY

- Increase the dog's daily exercise
- Provide environmental enrichment to allow for opportunities for mental stimulation

Follow-Up Care

PATIENT MONITORING

- Every 2–3 weeks initially

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Close supervision, exercise, and exposing the dog to different stimuli as a young puppy can help to prevent some of the unruly behaviors

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Injury as a result of escaping a fence, chasing a stimulus, or ingesting an inappropriate item

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Generally good response to treatment for jumping, digging, and stealing, if the owner is consistent in modifying the behavior
- Chasing behaviors may be more difficult and resistant to treatment

Key Points

JUMPING

- During training, prevention of the undesired jumping-up behavior is essential
- A head collar and leash facilitate training to gently guide the dog away from jumping
- Greeting visitors outside might diminish jumping behavior, or the dog's access to the situation can be restricted by placing it in another room until the visitor is seated
- Teach “Sit” and “Stay” as an alternative method to greet people
- When the dog is calm and easily controlled, practice sitting for a food reward in different areas of the house
- Sessions should be short—3–5 minutes with 8–12 repetitions per session
- Food rewards should be highly palatable and small (1/4-inch square or larger, depending on the size and weight of the dog); initially food rewards should be used consistently
- Add the word “Stay” when the duration of sitting is a few seconds; take a step away, return to the dog, and give the food reward—build up the time away from the dog to 3–5 minutes
- Repeat exercises near the door and with the addition of leaving and returning

- Next ask the dog to “Sit” for a food reward when returning from work or other absences of a few hours in duration
- Familiar visitors can enter, ask the dog to “Sit,” and give a food reward
- Alternatively, the owner can reward the dog for remaining seated as visitors enter
- Eventually the food rewards can be reduced to intermittent but frequent use
- Dogs that like to retrieve and are too excited to sit may do better if a ball is tossed as a visitor enters—this is more beneficial if a dog has been taught to sit prior to an item's being tossed again
- The owner should avoid increasing the dog's excitement by walking calmly to the door and speaking in a quiet voice
- People should avoid rewarding the jumping with attention (such as pushing the dog off); do not acknowledge or interact with the dog; hold arms against the body, and turn body away from the dog—some dogs will stop jumping and ignore the person
- Stepping on the dog's toes or squeezing the paws and other punishment usually are ineffective and can lead to aggression; therefore, these “techniques” should be avoided

DIGGING

- Digging associated with temperature regulation occurs in hot or cold weather to help cool or to conserve body heat, respectively; an adequately cooled or heated environment or shelter should minimize this problem
- Digging associated with rodents can occur inside or outside; this behavior likely will persist until the rodents are removed
- Digging associated with separation anxiety, escaping a phobic stimulus, or OCD should resolve with treatment of those conditions; dogs with separation anxiety should not be left alone in the yard for extended periods of time
- For digging in the owner's presence or not associated with any of the previously described situations, the owner should increase the dog's exercise and activity; aerobic exercise should occur before leaving the dog unsupervised in the yard—the provision of interactive toys (like automatic tennis-ball throwers or food-puzzle toys) may be helpful
- If the digging persists, create an area where it is acceptable for the dog to dig; a children's sandbox can be used for this purpose or an area can be marked off with wood and filled with sand or topsoil; initially bury toys or food items with the dog observing, so the dog is directed to and rewarded for digging in the specific area
- Supervision is necessary to redirect the dog to another activity as it starts to dig; aversive stimuli (such as loud noise, water spray) can be used to interrupt the digging but may not affect the digging when the owner is absent; a motion-activated sprinkler or putting stones or water in the dug area might prevent digging in that specific area but may not affect digging in other areas, so they are not recommended

CHASING

- A no-pull harness or head collar can be helpful in controlling the dog in the presence of the chase stimulus; herding breeds exhibit a phenotypic behavior that may respond better to control and management than to treatment
- Dogs that chase will need to be exposed to (desensitized) and taught a different response (counter-conditioned) to the stimulus; this should be done gradually
- The owner should use “Sit-and-Stay” exercises with the dog, with the addition of a “Look” command, using a treat brought up to the owner's eye—this will help get the dog's attention and focus it back on the owner, when the dog sees the moving stimulus
- Sessions should be 3–5 minutes, with numerous repetitions per session; initially work with the dog inside without distractions, having it “Sit,” “Stay,” and “Look”
- Next, work in a quiet yard with the dog on a leash, have the dog “Sit,” “Stay,” step away, return, “Look,” and give the food reward; when the dog is successful, the process can be repeated in a more distracting part of the yard—if the dog is too distracted, the owner should work with the dog at times of day when fewer distractions (such as passers-by or traffic) are present
- The owner should first work with the dog without the chase stimulus present; if the owner is able to keep the dog's attention, the owner then should stage the chase stimulus (like a bike or person jogging) to pass by at a great distance while working with the dog; the owner might need to increase the speed of the repetitions and rewards
- Each day, if the dog is able to ignore the chase stimulus, the owner should move a few inches closer to the chase

stimulus; if the dog is unable to ignore the chase stimulus, the distance should be increased—when the dog is able to ignore the chase stimulus in the yard, the owner can incorporate the same exercise on a walk; when the owner sees the chase stimulus, he or she should ask the dog to “Sit,” “Stay,” and “Look,” and then reward the dog

STEALING

- The dog's attempts to initiate play and chase may result in stealing
- Adequate attention, exercise, and toys before the owner becomes preoccupied (such as making dinner, working, watching television) will help to decrease this motivation for stealing
- Owners should not engage in chasing the dog; they should ignore the dog and walk away, get a treat, and call the dog to them—while the dog is in the process of dropping the item, the owner can say “Drop,” “Good dog,” and give the dog the treat—the dog is being rewarded for relinquishing the item
- The owner may want to give a second treat so the dog does not “race” for the dropped item; it may be necessary to scatter a number of treats for the dog to pick up while the item is removed; the item should be placed out of view and not shown to the dog
- If the dog retreats under furniture, the owner should not pursue it—if the dog feels threatened or cornered, it may defend itself aggressively; it is imperative that the item be retrieved; the owner may need to lure the dog out of hiding with high-value treats or offers of a walk or a game
- For food stealing, food needs to be placed out of the dog's reach, since acquiring food is highly rewarding; gating (for example, using a baby gate) the dog out of food preparation and dining areas may be necessary
- Products that can interrupt the dog's behavior and are mildly aversive can help correct the stealing behavior; motion detectors (for example, an alarm that sounds when motion is detected or a motion-activated compressed air sprayer designed specifically for use with pets) can be helpful in deterring stealing behavior
- If the dog steals food because it is on a diet, a protein source (such as plain chicken or other meat) or low-calorie foods (such as raw or cooked vegetables) can be added to the dog's food so it might feel less hungry

Notes

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