

Resources on Puppy and Kitten Behavior, Socialization, and Training

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Veterinarians are often faced with requests for books and other resources on a variety of topics, including behavior topics. When it comes to socialization and training of young pets, particularly puppies, many books are available; however, not all provide the best advice. While most have many good points, many also recommend techniques that are now considered outdated and inappropriate based on improved scientific understanding of animal behavior and learning. In this column, I review some of the books that I would recommend to clients as resources on the behavior, socialization, and training of puppies and kittens. A resource specifically for veterinarians is discussed in Box 1.^a

The best books combine a current understanding of the scientific knowledge of animal behavior with consideration of animal welfare and convey this information in a way the typical puppy (or kitten) owner can easily read and understand. Unfortunately, while researching this column, I read a number of books that, despite containing a lot of good advice, also contained information that ranged from incorrect but harmless to clearly harmful. Common problems in books on puppy training include an overemphasis on the concept of dominance and hierarchy, resulting in recommendations that are inappropriate for interactions with a young puppy. Recommendations that are based on the idea that owners must show a puppy “who’s boss” are generally in the same league as recommendations to use interactions typical of military boot camp on a 3-year-old child: while their suitability for use on an older dog (or human) might be debated, they are definitely age inappropriate and likely to cause harm. In addition, despite the development in the past decade of some excellent training tools that are substantial improvements over tools developed in the early part of the previous century, inertia and familiarity often maintain the use of outdated methods, and many recently written books still recommend the use of training tools that should be retired (e.g., choke collars; Box 2).

PUPPY TRAINING

Puppy’s First Steps: The Whole-Dog Approach to Raising a Happy, Healthy, Well-Behaved Puppy (Houghton Mifflin, 2007) is written by the faculty of

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^aSocialization of puppies and kittens to help them become behaviorally normal pets was discussed in a previous column (“Socialization Classes for Puppies and Kittens,” November 2007). All columns are archived at CompendiumVet.com.

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Box 1. Kitten Resource for Veterinarians

An important resource for veterinarians is the **Feline Behavior Guidelines from the American Association of Feline Practitioners** (*JAVMA* 2005;227:70-84).

These guidelines were written by a team of board-certified behaviorists and feline practitioners who comprehensively reviewed the scientific literature on feline behavior for this project and brought their diverse, extensive experience to the writing process. The guidelines include information on normal cat behavior; prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of behavior problems; and standards for conducting kitten socialization classes. Unfortunately, a similar set of guidelines has not yet been developed for dogs.

the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University and edited by Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, DACVA, DACVB, with Lawrence Lindner. This book is not entirely about behavior; it also contains chapters on preventive medical and health care, diet, and what to do in case of an emergency. However, the bulk of the book focuses on behavior and behavior-related topics.

Rather than giving specific recommendations, the book's first chapter, "How to Select a Puppy," focuses on educating potential dog owners about issues they should consider before choosing a particular breed of dog or a mixed-breed dog. The second chapter, "Getting Puppy Settled In," addresses issues to be considered before bringing the puppy home. Other chapters are dedicated to the socialization period and how puppies perceive their environment, providing owners with information that will help them better understand their puppy. Although the authors explain the importance of participation in socialization classes, the nuts and bolts of running puppy socialization classes are not given because this is a book for owners. However, veterinary staff can apply many ideas presented in the chapter on socialization to developing such classes. The chapter "Young Dogs and Young Children Under the Same Roof" frankly but gently discusses important issues that arise when dogs and young children live together and emphasizes the importance of parental supervision and responsibility. The basics of training puppies are presented in a four-chapter section titled "Sit! And Other Tricks," which covers housetraining, identification of potential behavior problems, and prevention of behavior problems. The last chapter in this section discusses environmental enrichment, which is important to the

Box 2. Types of Collars

The main reason that choke collars are repeatedly mentioned in training discussions is that they have been around for a very long time. Much better training collars, including various head collars (e.g., Gentle Leader [Premier Pet Products, Midlothian, VA]), are now available, and I never recommend the use of choke collars. Likewise, I do not recommend the use of prong collars, which occasionally puncture the trachea. Appropriately used, head collars are effective in stopping pulling and are, in my opinion, safer. Correctly fitted harnesses, especially some recently developed models (e.g., Easy Walk [Premier Pet Products]), can provide excellent and safe control of a dog as well.

development of a puppy—and dog—that can be content when left alone.

This is an excellent book, and I recommend having a copy available for clients to flip through, whether they have a new puppy or are considering getting one. The target audience is puppy owners, but even veterinarians who have worked with thousands of puppies will probably find a new idea or two. The information is scientifically accurate yet written in a very readable, user-friendly style. Practical tips are embedded in more general information. In addition, the book not only gives good, scientifically sound advice (e.g., use positive reinforcement for training) but also explains why its advice is sound and why contradictory advice found in some other books (e.g., recommendations to use choke collars and punishment) is not. Understanding the reasons behind the recommendations should help owners to effectively and appropriately rear a puppy. If you recommend only one book on puppy behavior, this is the one.

Before & After Getting Your Puppy (New World Library, 2004) by Ian Dunbar, PhD, BVetMed, MRCVS, CPDT, is, overall, an excellent book that focuses strictly on puppy behavior and related issues. It has chapters on selecting puppies, puppy social development, and basic training, such as housetraining and teaching the puppy to chew on its toys rather than other items. It also discusses how to prevent common, minor nuisance problems such as mouthing. The latter part of the book addresses the difficult period of adolescence, a subject that is often absent from other books. The behavior changes that are normal for adolescent dogs are covered along with good information on how best to deal with them.

The one concern I have about this book is the attribution of most destructiveness by dogs when left alone to

poor training rather than separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is a serious and common problem, and owners should not assume that destructiveness while they are gone is a training issue. In 29 years of seeing behavior problems in clinical practice, I have rarely seen cases in which destructiveness during owner absence was related to training. However, videos taken of many patients have revealed dogs in serious distress: whining, crying, shaking, and salivating. The destructiveness is often only the tip of the iceberg, but it may be the only sign of a dog's distress that owners witness because when they come home, the dog is quite happy. Anyone with a dog that is destructive in his or her absence should present the problem to a veterinarian and assume that the dog has separation anxiety unless a comprehensive evaluation demonstrates otherwise.

Krista Cantrell's *Tao of Puppies: How to Raise a Good Dog Without Really Trying* (The Lyons Press, 2004) is the type of book that people seem to either love or hate. Some people prefer to skip philosophical perspectives and get straight to the practical advice. This book, with regular quotes from the *Tao Te Ching*, is not for them. Personally, I enjoy books that attempt to bring Taoist philosophy into issues of everyday life, and I think that overall, this is a good book for people who like to begin with philosophy and then explore its practical applications.

One of the book's strengths is the way it helps owners think about issues as they pertain to puppies. For example, in the chapter titled, "Before you punish your puppy, read this," one of the question boxes that appear periodically throughout the book begins with questions that an owner should ask himself or herself

before deciding that a puppy is “bad,” such as, “Is my request or expectation reasonable?” and “Does the puppy know what I want?” While the book educates owners about normal puppy behavior and learning, the emphasis is on getting owners to consciously think about what they are doing.

Like many of the books I reviewed, this book places more emphasis on the concept of dominance and hierarchy than is necessary or desirable. For example, the author emphasizes that it is important to always eat before the puppy eats. If dinner is going to be late, the owner is to prepare a small plate for himself or herself, place it on the counter beside the puppy’s dish, and eat while the puppy watches. After the owner finishes eating this contrived snack, the puppy can be fed. I am not aware of any research that would support this being a necessary or beneficial practice and have never recommended it. While I doubt that this practice would cause any harm, other than inconveniencing an owner who wasn’t planning on eating until much later, it promotes the unnecessary idea that one must be “dominant” in all circumstances, including circumstances that do not correspond to normal canine social interactions. In addition, it may encourage begging behavior during dinner because the puppy learns that it is invariably fed after the owner eats.

Sarah Hodgson’s *Puppies for Dummies* (Wiley Publishing, 2006) has the organization and “tips” sections that characterize the “Dummies” books and that many people like. The author is a dog trainer with more than 20 years’ experience. The book is well organized, so people with specific questions can readily look things up. As can be expected from the title, this book is not just about behavior, although that topic is heavily emphasized in the content. Diet, basic medical care, and, of course, choosing a puppy are also covered.

Overall, the behavioral advice is sound. The author extensively discusses the use of positive reinforcement, clicker training, and other appropriate training techniques, and she specifies that head collars are her favorite tool for training puppies. However, she also discusses choke collars (sometimes called *training collars*) and prong collars as viable options. These discussions are appropriately qualified—for example, she specifies that choke collars should be used only to make an attention-getting sound—however, there are many other ways to make attention-getting sounds, and having a choke collar on a dog makes it all too tempting for the owner to choke the dog.

That said, this book has a number of unique strengths. Numerous tables give well-organized, detailed informa-

Key Points

- Many books on the socialization and training of puppies are available. Most have many good points; however, many recommend techniques that are now considered outdated and inappropriate based on improved scientific understanding of animal behavior and learning.
- The best books combine a current understanding of the scientific knowledge of animal behavior with consideration of animal welfare and convey this information in a way that the typical puppy owner can easily understand.
- Books on the socialization and training of kittens, while not as common as books on training puppies, do exist.

tion on a variety of topics. For example, a list of nuisance behaviors (e.g., jumping in greeting, nipping in play, stealing objects) is followed with information on common owner reactions that actually encourage these problems as well as reactions that will discourage these behaviors in most cases. Much of the advice on preventing and treating behavior problems is also age and temperament specific, avoiding the two potential pitfalls of giving advice that (1) is so ambiguous that pet owners cannot apply it and (2) only applies to certain age groups or temperaments. With the caveats mentioned above, this can be a good book, especially for clients who want to look up specific topics rather than read an entire book.

KITTEN TRAINING

Training Your Cat (Hyland House Publishing, 2001), by Kersti Seksel, BVSc (Hons), MRCVS, MA (Hons), FACVSc (Animal Behaviour), DACVB, CMAVA, DECVBM-CA, is an excellent resource. It is available directly from the author (sabs.com.au) as well as from the publisher. While the title suggests that the book is entirely about training cats, it is actually a much more comprehensive resource written for cat owners and would-be cat owners. Like the Tufts book on puppies, it has sections on selecting cats, bringing a new kitten home, and maintaining basic health care. One chapter provides basic education on normal feline behavior, including sensory abilities and communication. Another chapter on development details the different developmental periods of the kitten, which are as important for a kitten owner to understand as puppy development is for a puppy owner. The title does, however, emphasize the bulk of the content of the book and attracts potential readers to a subject that many people still erro-

neously think is impossible: training cats. Kitten socialization classes, including the Kitten Kindy program developed by the author, are addressed. In addition to the training that most people expect, such as litterbox use, basic commands and training more commonly associated with dogs, such as “sit” and “come,” and walking on a leash while wearing a harness are discussed. The book also covers causes of some common behavior problems and ways to prevent them.

About This Column

Behavior problems are a significant cause of death (euthanasia) in companion animals. While most veterinary practices are necessarily geared toward the medical aspect of care, there are many opportunities to bring behavior awareness into the clinic for the benefit of the pet, the owner, and ourselves. This column acknowledges the importance of behavior as part of veterinary medicine and speaks practically about using it effectively in daily practice.

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Socialization is training your puppy to accept new people, animals, and places. Learn how to socialize your puppy to encourage good habits and behavior. Puppy socialization ideally should take place when your dog is between two and four months old. Because it has not received all of its vaccinations by this point, however, you should talk to your veterinarian about when it's safe to expose your puppy to new people and places. It's important that your dog does not interact with unknown animals or walk in areas where unknown animals might have been. There are many diseases a puppy can pick up before vaccines are complete. Introduce New People. Socialization should involve as many people and situations as possible. Almost a third of puppies are missing out on important socialization during the sensitive period. Only 51-65% of vets discuss behaviour with new puppy and kitten owners, but this would be a good time to educate people about socialization and training. The scientists write, "Owners who attended classes with their puppies provided those puppies with more socialization opportunities than owners who did not attend and also indicated more favorable responses to managing signs of fear in their puppies and to disciplining them. Socialisation refers to the process of introducing your puppy to new sights, sounds and experiences. It's all about helping them to get used to the world, and teaching them to be confident in new situations. How socialisation can help? Effective socialisation is vital for you and your puppy's life together, as it can have a huge impact on a puppy's long term physical and mental wellbeing. While it only takes a few weeks to socialise your puppy, the lessons they learn in the first months of their life can guide them for a lifetime. Avoid unwanted or aggressive behaviour.