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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dear Suzanne,

It's hard to believe another December is upon us. We hope the season finds you surrounded by loved ones and time to enjoy the company of family and friends.

Our thanks to you for your support of us this past year, and our best wishes to you for a joyous holiday season and prosperous new year.

Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **The Cat's Meow**

Cats communicate vocally with people quite differently than dogs do. There is no mistaking that yowling, growling, hissing, and spitting occur when cats are threatening or aggressive. Cats don't make these sounds when they want something from us or are being friendly. In contrast, dogs can bark in both friendly and threatening interactions, although the barks may sound quite different depending on the context.



Dog Piece: **Aggression Workshops**



Aggressive behavior in dogs is a common problem. In order to make decisions about adoption, placement, or returning the

dog to its owner, shelters, animal control agencies, rescue groups, and even municipalities are looking to better understand aggressive behavior, and are searching for ways to evaluate

dogs and make predictions about the likelihood a dog may display aggression. Workshops about predicting and modifying aggressive behavior have become more common in recent years.

We recently attended one such workshop and the experience made it crystal clear how challenging it can be to present good information in a safe environment. If you are considering attending (with or without a dog), promoting, or conducting such a workshop, here are seven recommendations about what to look for.

1. Of primary concern is safety. If the workshop includes dogs, all dogs should be crated, except when being used for demonstration. Dogs should not be sitting with their owners, unconfined, where they could snap or lunge at other dogs or people getting too close. Anytime a dog is out of a crate it should be muzzled. Dogs should not be allowed to run loose in the venue.
2. The presenter should be given, or obtain directly, a thorough behavior history on all dogs coming to the workshop. Prior to the workshop, the presenter should have interacted with each dog being used for demonstration or at least reviewed videotape of the dogs and/or interviewed the owner.
3. The goal of a workshop should not be to elicit aggressive behavior from a dog so that he can be "corrected". Instead, scenarios should be created that allow the presenter to demonstrate how to prevent aggression from being elicited and how to use behavior modification techniques to teach the dog how to react non-aggressively.
4. The presenter's attention should be focused on the dog(s) that are being worked or handled. Dogs should not be tethered or leashed without "eyes on" that dog to ensure unwanted behaviors

The most common vocalization cats direct to people is the meow. Most experts in cat behavior believe cats meow at relatively high rates to people because the behavior so often "works" for cats to get what they want. Our cat Buffett meows at us anytime we are in the kitchen because he wants us to feed him. Due to his tendency to overeat, Buffett is not on a free-choice feeding routine, and he thinks he is always hungry. Studies have shown it is quite easy to train food-deprived cats to meow.

There is significant individual variation among cats regarding frequency of meows, what elicits the behavior, and how the meow sounds. Many cat owners report they can tell from the type of meow what the cat wants. A meow to elicit petting sounds different from a meow when a cat is begging for food.

Acoustically, the meow is similar to the calls kittens make when they are alone, cold, hungry, or trapped (e.g. if the queen is lying on them). Interestingly, adult cats rarely meow to each other. The meow seems to be primarily a cat-human communication. Some experts in cat behavior have likened the human-cat relationship to that of mother-kitten, so it is interesting that cat-to-cat meowing occurs primarily from kittens to mom.

Meowing can be a mutually rewarding communication between cat and owner; or it can be annoying as Buffett's food-begging meow has become; or meowing can be a more serious behavior issue, as it is in older cats who meow for hours at night, keeping their owners awake.

In some cases, nocturnal meowing is nothing more than normal behavior. Cats tend to be more active either at night, or near dawn and dusk (the technical term for this is crepuscular) and meowing is just part of their activity pattern. However, excessive nocturnal meowing in older cats is not well understood. It may be due to increased anxiety resulting from neurological and sensory changes as part of the aging process.

Because cats so often meow to get what they want, dedicated cat owners will find our CD program ["What Cats Want: Creating a Cat](#)

are not being "practiced" or repeated because no one is paying attention. Also, opportunities to reinforce good behavior will be missed if the presentor is not watching the dog.

5. Management and behavior modification techniques should be procedures owners can do. This means handling skills may need to be taught as well. What a skilled, experienced behaviorist or trainer can accomplish with a dog may have no relation to what a dog's owner is capable of implementing.

6. Have realistic expectations about attending the workshop. If you are bringing a dog with an aggression problem, do not attend a workshop expecting your dog to be "fixed" by the end of it.

7. Similarly, do not expect to learn predictive evaluation techniques. In other words, procedures that attempt to link a dog's behavior in one context (he struggles to avoid having his muzzled held) to behavior in another (therefore he's likely to bite when someone takes his food bowl away or disciplines him) have not been subjected to validity testing. This means there is no basis to make predictive assumptions.

Aggressive behavior is a serious issue. The goals for workshops on the subject should be to impart scientifically accurate information and helpful techniques that further our understanding of dog behavior in order to improve the welfare and quality of life of dogs and prevent injuries to people. Well- run seminars can accomplish these goals, poorly conducted ones do neither, and in fact can have quite the opposite effect.

The response to our [Christmas toy promotion](#) has been totally overwhelming. We suspected the toys

[Friendly Environment](#)" invaluable in enhancing your favorite cat's quality of life. Quantity discounts are available for shelters and veterinarians wanting to provide this resource to new cat owners. Cat owners can listen to the audio version on the way home from your facility!! Take 15% off individual copies as our way of saying "Happy Holidays" to cats everywhere.

• **Our Piece:
Pets as Gifts**

Animal shelters typically discourage people from adopting pets as holiday gifts for others. In fact, many shelters will refuse an adoption to people who want to acquire a pet as a gift. Although it makes intuitive sense that it's not a good idea to spring a pet on a person who either doesn't want one, isn't prepared for one, or both, there is another perspective.



First, a study conducted in the mid 1990s by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, of people surrendering their pets to shelters, found that pets acquired as gifts were actually less likely to be surrendered to shelters than those acquired for other reasons. This study doesn't tell us whether the pet-as-a-gift was a surprise to the new pet parent or not – something that could be a significant variable. It's possible that if the pet wasn't a surprise, surrender was less likely because the pet carried a symbolic value connected to the giver.

Second, many people take time off from work during the holidays. This can be quite beneficial in terms of helping a new pet adjust to the household. Housetraining, introductions to resident pets, preventing destructive behavior, meeting a new pet's social needs, and managing virtually any behavior is going to be easier when people are home more rather than gone 8-10 hours five days a week.

Guests can also facilitate socialization of

would be popular but we were frankly unprepared for the large volume of orders we received. We thought we had plenty in stock, but the numbers of orders were greater than anything we had anticipated. We sincerely apologize to those of you who experienced a delay in the receipt of your order. We have more toys arriving almost daily and our elves are working at top speed to ship to you ASAP. We truly appreciate your patience.

We now have the [Tug-a-Jug](#), [Bouncy Bone](#), and gnawhide refills in stock, ready to ship. So although we can't guarantee Christmas delivery, you can still give your dog great new toys to enjoy in 2007.

puppies and kittens, as long as the household isn't too hectic. Pleasant contact and good experiences with unfamiliar people is so important to help these youngsters grow up friendly toward and tolerant of everyone they meet.

But both young and adult animals can be stressed by too much interaction with unfamiliar people, especially if they don't have a way of getting away from folks for some "down time". This is especially important when managing interactions with children. Kids can be overly enthusiastic about handling, touch, cuddling and playing with a new pet, and have no idea that the pet may not share their enthusiasm. Parents must be on top of things, and not only designate a safe place for the pet where it is not to be disturbed (a bedroom or crate), but closely supervise ALL interactions between children and the pet.

There will likely be more opportunities for new pets to discover items that are "off-limits", such as wrapped presents, decorations, plants, and delectable goodies they not only shouldn't have but can make them quite ill.

For all these reasons, families acquiring a pet over the holidays need to commit significant time and energy into supervising the pet, providing for its needs and helping it adjust to the family. If prospective pet parents are prepared and able to focus their attention on their new pet, and less on other holiday activities, the holidays may be a great time to add a loving family member.

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• **What's New:** **Suzanne and Dan Sail Away**



We just returned from a "seminar at sea" type

cruise where we spent two days learning new techniques to create improved audio and DVD products for you. The seminar instructors, Jim Edwards and Mike Stewart, created an audio and a DVD product, right on the spot. We'll be putting what we learned to work early in the new year. We also enjoyed snorkeling time in the beautiful Caribbean sea at Cozumel and Grand Caymen, our two ports of call. We've shared a picture from our swim with the sting rays excursion.

We'll be visiting Dan's family in Texas for a few days before Christmas, and spend New Years at Grand Mesa, high in the Colorado Rockies. After our Irish setter Coral's experience with hypothermia two years ago that some of you may remember, she now has a heavy winter coat so she'll be ready for fun in the snow.

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We're looking forward to the new year with renewed enthusiasm to create more products and services to help pet parents and pet professionals create healthy pet behaviors and avoid problems.