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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dog Piece: **Sleep Problems in Dogs and Horses**

Sleep disturbances are a big problem for many people. We know that inadequate sleep is linked to a variety of ailments in



Dear Suzanne,

We are enjoying beautiful spring-like weather with 70 degree temperatures here in Denver. This is usually our false spring, right before we get hit with several wet spring snow storms. But in the meantime our dogs are loving being in the sunshine. We hope this finds you in spring-like spirits too. Best wishes, Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **The Perfect Litterbox**

It's well known that failure to use the litterbox consistently is one of the most common behavior problems in cats, and a common reason for their surrender to animal shelters. The more research done into cat behavior, the more obvious it becomes how much we still need to learn about them and how best to meet their behavioral needs.



One topic of discussion at our recent IFAAB meeting (see What's New) was behavior

people, but what about our companion animals? Do they have sleep problems? Do those sleep problems affect their quality of life? The answer to both questions is yes.

Scientists have discovered that dogs, cats, horses and livestock all can show many of the same sleep problems that plague people including insomnia and narcolepsy (sudden, uncontrolled sleep episodes). Disruption in normal sleep patterns can be a sensitive indicator of stressors impinging on animals or people. Those stressors may be affecting individuals' welfare without their being aware of it.

At our recent IFAAB meeting, and several veterinary conferences, Dr. Joseph Bertone, an equine veterinarian at the Western University of Health Sciences Veterinary College, reported a number of cases of horses showing uncontrollable sleep episodes. These horses would stumble, fall and/or collapse in sleep at times when they shouldn't. Initially they were diagnosed as having narcolepsy, a sleep problem that is poorly understood but thought to be a neurological disorder.

Horses with narcolepsy are frequently euthanized because it can be dangerous when they suddenly collapse into a sleep episode. Dr. Bertone was able to show that in many of these cases, the horses were not suffering from narcolepsy, but rather from severe sleep deprivation. The sleep deprivation was caused by subtle changes in the horses' physical or social environment of which the owners were unaware.

For example, one mare had been moved to a new stall that wasn't big enough for her to lie down comfortably. As a result, she wouldn't lie down, she wouldn't sleep and she would collapse into sleeping bouts when out of the stall. Simply moving one wall of the stall allowed the mare to lie comfortably and sleep. The

patterns cats display that might indicate they aren't entirely satisfied with their litterboxes.

Casual observations of cats eliminating outside reveal that most cats will engage in sniffing, circling and scratching behaviors to some degree both before and after elimination. In contrast, some cats will walk into the litterbox, relieve themselves and walk out, without displaying any of this normal behavior sequence.

Could the absence of these behaviors, for some cats at least, indicate that something about the litterbox is not to their liking? We could also ask the same question when cats seem to want to touch the litter as little as possible, by perching on the side of the side of the box, scratching surfaces around the box rather than the litter itself, or shaking their paws after exiting the box.

Other cats will get into the box, then leave without relieving themselves, while still others will approach the box, sniff, then walk away without using it. There are several alternative explanations for these behaviors that make some degree of sense, such as a cat perhaps checking to see whether another cat has used the box for elimination. Without objective research that correlates these behaviors with failure to use the litterbox, we would be jumping to conclusions to say that any of these behaviors are warning signs for a developing litterbox problem.

What might be more important is observation of a change in litterbox behaviors. A cat that used to scratch enthusiastically no longer does so. Or a cat that used to stand in the litter to relieve itself is now perching on the edge of the box. While we can't say that these changes mean a cat will soon begin urinating or defecating outside the box, it would be prudent for a cat owner to think about any recent changes to the litterbox and to revert to the litterbox's previous characteristics.

To help you provide the perfect litterbox for your cat, we've created a 20 minute audio describing litterbox features that matter to most cats. Visit PerfectLitterbox.com to listen to this audio lesson. If you work in a shelter or veterinary clinic, share this important

stumbling, falling and sudden sleep bouts out of the stall all ceased. See Dr. Bertone's videos by [clicking here](#).

Dr. Bertone's point was that careful evaluation of a horse's environment may reveal stressors that can lead to sleep problems and a poor quality of life. The same may be true of dogs, cats and our other companion animals.

For example, many dogs sleep less at boarding kennels and day care centers, and come home and sleep for hours. People assume this is good, because the dog comes home tired from playing and enjoying himself, but that may not always be the case. Especially in the kennel environment, the dog's regular sleep patterns may be disrupted. Lack of sleep could be a stressor, that if severe, can affect immune function, making dogs more susceptible to infectious disease.

Adequate rest and sleep is a husbandry issue that animal owners and caretakers should monitor, and note changes in patterns and habits that may indicate changes in the animal's environment should be made.

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information with your cat owning clients!

Our audio CD "[What Cats Want: Creating a Cat Friendly Environment](#)" provides more detailed information about meeting cats' behavioral needs.

• **Our Piece:** **Client Compliance**

Another topic discussed at our recent IFAAB meeting was how behaviorists and trainers can increase the chances that the pet owners they work with will be able to follow through with a training or behavior modification program.



Whether you have received or given information about changing a pet's behavior, you know it's not always easy for pet owners to follow through with everything they've been told to do. This issue of "client compliance" is a big one in veterinary and human medicine as well.

This topic has received far more attention by many other professionals than we could devote to it at our busy meeting, but several take-home points stayed with us. First, rather than asking for 100% implementation of a recommendation right away, start with something a bit less daunting. If the goal is for owners to play with their cat for 2, 15 minute sessions every day, at first 3 times a week may be the best they can do.

Second, it's helpful to identify small, early signs of success. If the goal is to stop the dog from barking incessantly at the doorbell, people may not realize that decreasing the duration of the barking to 30 seconds from 45 seconds is a huge accomplishment. Rather than feeling frustrated that the dog is still barking longer than they would like, remind them of the significant progress they've made.

Third, some behavior and training problems will ultimately require owners to implement a number of techniques, and/or modify several different routines with their pets. It's easy for

people to become overwhelmed if given 10 things to do all at once. Instead, start with no more than three actions or exercises. Perhaps changing from free-choice to regular feedings, asking a dog to sit before putting his food bowl down, and adding a tidbit while walking by his food dish would be enough to work on for the first week or so.

We all know that changing a pet's behavior requires commitment from the pet's owner, but pet professionals have an important role to play in supporting and nurturing that commitment. If you are a trainer, and would like to improve your client skills, we recommend Pia Silvani's 5-week telecourse "[Becoming a Great Dog Training Instructor](#)", beginning April 4. Pia always plays to rave reviews, so we'd suggest registering now, before her class fills.

- **What's New:**
Dr. Hetts to deliver April New Jersey Seminar

Suzanne will be presenting a two-day seminar "[Searching For Truth: The Science of Dog Behavior](#)" at St. Hubert's Animal Welfare Center on April 21 and 22nd. Registration is now open. This workshop won't be repeated this year so REGISTER NOW AND don't miss out!



In place of our popular free telecourse "Managing Chaos at the Door" we now have a streaming audio lesson that presents a portion of this information. Listen to it at [BadDogsAtTheDoor.com](#) and pass this link onto friends and clients who can benefit from it. For more complete information, our [audio CD by the same name](#) is still available on our website. (Ignore any mention of incompatibility issues as this does NOT apply to audio CDs)

We just returned from our annual Interdisciplinary Forum in Applied Animal Behavior (IFAAB) get together, held this year in New Orleans. The Dog Piece and Cat Piece articles in this issue are based on subjects discussed there.

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Animal Behavior Associates had a booth at the first annual Pet Expo in Denver this past weekend. We enjoyed meeting many new pet owners and pet professionals as well. Premier's [Bouncy Bones](#) and [Tug-a-Jug](#) toys continued to be run-away hits with visitors to our booth.