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Behavior Education for Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dog Piece: **Will Rover Bite?**

One of the biggest concerns dog owners have is their pet's potential for aggressiveness. How can you know if your dog is likely to bite? As a dog owner, you can look



Dear Suzanne,

We're knee-deep in preparing for this weekend's aggression seminar! Hope we see many of you there, but if not, check back in the next few weeks on our website for the DVD of the seminar.

Best wishes,
Suzanne and Dan

• **Cat Piece:** **Moving Sunny**

A store we have been trading at for several years has a resident cat named Sunny. She is a beautiful and very friendly short-haired yellow tabby. She has been the greeter at the store for years and brightens our day whenever we go there.

However Sunny is now 14 years old, and is developing some health problems common to older animals. The owner is trying to place Sunny in a loving home with a family for her to live out her final years.



The motives of Sunny's owner are clearly to help her have a good quality of life in her old

for warning signs of potential problems. You can also have an animal behaviorist, trainer or other pet professional do a more formal assessment of your dog's behavior.

Among the warning signs are threatening behavior when visitors come to your house, around food or other possessions, when your dog is disturbed or moved, or when people run, bike or skateboard near him. It is neither normal nor acceptable for dogs to threaten people in these situations.

Because aggression can be a result of fear, dogs that show strong fear of unfamiliar people, being handled or approached or when near possessions may be at risk of becoming aggressive. Fearful dogs may become aggressive if they learn that biting will take away the source of the fear, such as a stranger trying to reach for them (most of us move away when dogs snap at us).

Growling, snapping, snarling, lunging, intense staring or stiffening of the body are all elements of threatening behavior that are warnings a dog is likely to bite. We can't say precisely how likely the dog is to bite, only that threats must always be taken seriously as warnings to bite.

When pet professionals do more formal risk assessments, they use a variety of sources of information to help determine how dangerous a dog might be. One source of information is historical information about how the dog has behaved in the past, because the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

Another source of information is a formal behavioral evaluation in which the dog is observed in a variety of situations or simulated situations. Also important is the dog's "life style" - daily routines, and how he reacts to the people and animals he normally encounters.

age. However the question arises, is it really in Sunny's best interest to move to a new home after living in the store for so many years? There are both positive and negative aspects to such a move.

On the positive side, Sunny would be able to get more attention and care at night as there is no one with her in the store after closing. She would also have a more consistent environment with the same people around all the time and avoid the controlled chaos of a retail environment.

On the negative side, some cats do not do well with changes to their environment or lifestyle. They can become very distressed when moved to a different home, with new people and with different activity patterns. Older cats in particular are less flexible in dealing with major changes to their lives.

So how can Sunny's owner know what would be best for her? How do other cat owners decide about making major life-style changes for their cats? There are no easy answers to these questions. We don't have scientifically valid tests of cat temperament that tell us which ones will do fine with major changes and which ones won't. However, there may be some information that can indicate a cat's adaptability to change.

One of these is how a cat deals with major disruptions such as a household full of visitors. How does Sunny respond to all the people in the store on a particularly busy day? Is she comfortable with them and stays out to greet them, or does she seem uncomfortable and tends to hide? A cat that is comfortable with lots of people coming and going may be better at handling a new and different social environment.

Another indicator is how the cat responds to car rides and traveling to new places. Can Sunny tolerate traveling away from the store and be comfortable with it? Cats that tolerate traveling and/or recover quickly from it will have an easier time with necessary travel such as trips to the veterinarian.

A third indicator is how a cat gets along with other animals. If Sunny hasn't been around

Common scenarios for evaluating dogs include around food and other possessions, when people approach and try to touch him, when groomed or handled, around quickly moving people, around people with an unusual appearance or dress, children, and other animals. The specific contexts may vary depending upon what the dog is likely to encounter.

The science of risk assessment for aggression in dogs is still in its infancy but the results can help owners and others make better informed decisions about how to manage and treat potentially aggressive dogs.

On Saturday and Sunday September 15th and 16th, Suzanne and Ms. Nancy Williams will be presenting a workshop on aggression in dogs that will address the issues of evaluating and working with aggressive dogs. See our What's New article for more information.

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**Back by popular demand!**  
**Pia Silvani's**  
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**Training Instructor Tele-**  
**Webcast Course**  
**5 consecutive Thursdays**  
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The two disc set audio
recording from our recent
tele- webclass, "Using
Counter Conditioning and
Desensitization Techniques
Effectively to Modify
Behavior" is ready!. Order
now, as our initial stock is
in limited supply. These
won't be shipped until the
week of September 17th.
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other cats or dogs she may be quite distressed in a new home with other pets. Even if a cat has lived with other animals in the past, it is no guarantee that she will get along with new animals in a new home. Sunny hasn't been around other animals for some time, so that may present problems for her in a multi-pet home.

So whether it is best for Sunny to go to a private home, is hard to know. She could be better off staying in a familiar environment, but if she's good at tolerating changes she may benefit from more social contact with one or two people who can dote on her.

Whatever Sunny's owners decide, we wish the best for this lovable, elderly cat. We wish our home was appropriate for her but with busy lives and pets with their own "issues", we don't think we're the right choice.

• **Our Piece:**  
**Response prevention: A technique to stop problem behavior**

Response prevention is a procedure where an animal is physically prevented from engaging in a specific behavior when exposed to the situation that normally elicits the behavior. This is not a new technique for changing behavior but it hasn't been used much with animals. It is often confused with flooding, but they're not the same.



Native Americans used to "break" horses through response prevention, although they probably didn't call it that. They would capture a wild horse, lay him down, tie his legs so he couldn't move, cover his eyes with a blanket then dance around him for hours in a ritualistic ceremony, touching the horse with blankets, hands and feathers. When released, the horse's fear of people was greatly reduced and the horse could be taught to be ridden. The horse's escape behavior was prevented in this situation and his fear of people greatly diminished.

## BEN IS COMING

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### Quick Links...

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Ms. Nancy Williams, an Associate Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, has used a similar technique to change the aggressive behavior of dogs. She took an aggressive dog, put him in a box, filled the box with grain so he could not move, then gradually exposed him to people or other dogs, which had previously elicited aggression. (NOTE: this was a safe procedure with the dog's vital signs continually monitored).

The stimulus dog or person was presented in graduated steps until the subject dog showed no agitation or threatening response.

Flooding is a procedure where an animal is forcibly exposed to a situation or stimulus that produces fear, anxiety or aggression at the highest possible level of intensity from the very beginning of training. The exposure continues without a break until the fearful, anxious or aggressive responses go away. Flooding doesn't attempt to control the behavior of the animal (except escape from the situation) and presents high levels of the stimulus from the very beginning of training. With response prevention procedures, the stimulus can be presented gradually or at high intensity, depending on the training situation.

Holding an aggressive dog on the end of a leash where he cannot attack another dog, but can still lunge, bark, snap and growl is NOT response prevention because too much of the aggressive response is still occurring.

This application of response prevention to dealing with aggressive or fearful animals has shown exciting potential. Why it works isn't yet well understood, nor is which dogs are the best candidates for it, so more research is needed. This weekend, Ms. Williams will be in Lakewood, Colorado to partner with us to include this information in a [seminar on canine aggression](#). See the "[What's New at ABA](#)" article to find out more and how you can order the DVD of the workshop.

- **What's New:**  
**Big Changes to ABA**

Big changes are coming to ABA in the next few months. We will be offering



exciting new opportunities to pet professionals for education in animal behavior, including new telecourses and webinars. We'll be interviewing other animal behavior experts on exciting topics, to increase the depth and breadth of our offerings. New educational programs on DVD and audio CD are on the horizon as well.

And BEN is coming - The Behavior Education Network, a membership site that will provide members with exclusive educational benefits to keep you up to date on the science of animal behavior, make you more effective at helping clients and their animals, and help your business become more profitable. Watch for more about BEN in the coming weeks.

It's not too late to register for our seminar "[Analyzing and Modifying Canine Aggression](#)" Saturday and Sunday, September 15 and 16. There are still a few seats available, but they are filling up fast!

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<http://www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com>

:: 303-932-9095

Watch our website, and look for an email from us when the DVD is ready!