

“What *is your* PROBLEM?”

**Cummings’ Animal Behavior Clinic brings answers to—
and treatment for—pets’ troublesome behavior.**

THE TENSION IN THE CONSULTATION room of Alice Moon-Fanelli, Ph.D., is palpable. Floyd lies deceptively quietly at the feet of a soft-spoken middle-aged woman. Moon-Fanelli, an Animal Behavior Society certified behaviorist, sits beside her desk. She’s semi-facing the dog, but her body language suggests she’d rather have the desk between them. The 14-month-old has a severe case of fear aggression and a hair trigger. The dog hasn’t yet bitten anyone outside the family; could it be just a matter of time?

Prior to the session, the owner and her mother filled out a detailed behavior history form, including confirmation that a veterinarian had given Floyd a complete physical examination. This is a prerequisite for any consultation at Cummings’ Animal Behav-

ior Clinic, including remote services such as VetFax and PetFax. VetFax consultation requests, submitted by veterinarians, are handled by clinic director Dr. Nicholas Dodman or veterinary resident Dr. Barbara Maurer. With PetFax, owners consult directly with Moon-Fanelli. At their best, consultations become an interactive relationship by telephone or e-mail, often with video submissions. But without face time it can be tough for some owners to get on track, reports Dr. Elizabeth Bradt, V86, owner of All Creatures Veterinary Clinic in Salem, Mass. One of her patients is a veterinarian-phobic Labrador. On Bradt’s suggestion, the owner requested a PetFax consultation, but weeks later still hadn’t implemented any of the recommendations. Animal behavior change, after all, usually requires human behavior change. And that takes motivation.

BY LESLIE LIMON PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELODY KO



Floyd's wary gaze
bells his hair trigger.

“JUST ONE QUICK QUESTION”

In their third-year animal behavior course, Cummings students learn they're likely to spend 25% of their time in private practice fielding behavior questions. For Bradt it typically happens during a pet's regular exam—mostly dogs but also exotic birds, a specialty of hers. (Compulsive feather-picking, she notes, can be a stress response to indoor habitat or owner behavior that violates avian norms.) Clients often expect free advice, a dilemma the Animal Behavior Clinic also faces each time someone calls with “just one quick question.” There is, of course, no such thing. Working through behavior issues with an animal and its owner is a complex matter requiring experience and academic training.

It also takes a certain mindset to “open your mind to the underlying motivation of another species and get to the root of its behavior,” explains Moon-Fanelli. The ability to see and interpret subtle nuances of an animal's body language is critical. She looks for these nuances during a consultation. She never interacts with the animal right off, but watches it closely to learn “what the animal is telling me about itself.” She also sizes up the clients to assess how well they'll be able to follow through. The woman with Floyd—the owner's mother—seems eager and motivated, but tense. And Moon-Fanelli wonders to herself if this woman can muster the leadership skills necessary to manage this dog's behavior.

“HIS OWN AGENDA”

The client's daughter bought Floyd in Australia at the age of three months, believing it to be a part-dingo Australian cattle dog. But Moon-Fanelli, behavior service coordinator Nicole Cottam, and Maurer (who lived in Australia) comment that he looks like no Australian cattle dog they've ever seen. And Moon-Fanelli, who has researched wild canids, isn't convinced it's part dingo. Although, she says, there is “something about the eyes,” a feature she keeps coming back to as she assesses Floyd's troubling behavior. “He's not relaxed, but he's giving no outward signs of fear. He goes from ‘zero to 60’ in his response. He has a strange look in his eyes; he doesn't want to make eye contact. And he's clearly got his own agenda.” Throughout the entire session, Moon-Fanelli warily

CANINE ETIQUETTE: A PRIMER

MANY BITE INCIDENTS ARISE NOT BECAUSE A DOG IS INHERENTLY PREDISPOSED TO aggression, but because a human, as a primate, is inherently predisposed to behavior that, from a canine perspective, “can be pretty bad,” says animal behaviorist Alice Moon-Fanelli, Ph.D. “Patting on the head is a primate thing; humans just can't control themselves. And up and over the head with a canid, of course, is a challenge.”

Humans also can't seem to resist cuddling. “If I met owners in the waiting room by throwing my arms around them and giving them a big kiss, they would be horrified,” Moon-Fanelli points out. “But people take that kind of license with animals.” She adds that a small dog learns to bite when people ignore its warning signals to back off, and proceed to “‘scoop me up, pat my head, whirl me around, and put their big lips on my tiny head.’ That's not how dogs introduce themselves to each other,” she says. “They stand, they sniff, then they romp.”

announces her intentions to Floyd before getting up to move about the room, and moves slowly.

In discussing a treatment plan, her approach is to summarize the whole picture first, then break it down into stages. The first stage focuses on just a few things to work on. With a fear-aggressive animal, treatment involves desensitization and counter-conditioning to alter its perceptions of the situations that induce fear and correct its aggressive behavior. The first step with Floyd is to teach him that if he doesn't respond immediately to a command, he won't get something he wants. “Give him a ‘job’ to do,” says Moon-Fanelli. “Cattle dogs need to work, so teach him to do things, even tricks. Let him figure out what behavior gets rewarded. We want him to think it's his idea, so he doesn't feel forced.” She models a technique to quickly train him to respond to commands. She tosses Floyd a few treats, which he gobbles up: a good sign that he's food motivated. Using an obedience training clicker with the treats, she begins training Floyd to make eye contact when his name is called. “If he en-

joys ‘click and treat,’” she predicts, “whenever he sees the clicker he'll get happier.”

“I CAN DO THIS!”

Moon-Fanelli goes over the same ground more than once as she discusses Floyd's treatment. Three times, to be exact. When she first came to Cummings, Dodman's tendency to repeat everything to her three times exasperated her. When she finally asked him why he did it, he replied that he'd gotten into the habit because, in clinical sessions, people need to hear things three times, a fact she now corroborates. This has more to do with the nature of the consultation than with the client: “Unlike medical clinicians, we have to teach and motivate clients to do the treatment themselves,” says Dodman. “I like to think they can walk out with a real sense of ‘I think I can do this!’”

As Moon-Fanelli scopes out Floyd's treatment, she acknowledges the challenges of managing a fear-aggressive dog, especially around people who violate canine etiquette (see Primer, above). To illustrate, she tells a funny anecdote of an encounter between her leashed beagle coyote hybrid (one of a few she kept, with permits, for her behavioral studies) and the unleashed dogs of two clueless young women. As the session room bursts into laughter, Floyd springs up with a take-no-prisoners growl. Everyone stops breathing as the frustrated client yanks on his leash and demands, “Knock it off! What is your problem? Lay down.” The dog shakes his head. She repeats, “Lay down.” He does, and everyone breathes again.

“I think the best we can hope for is to learn how to manage Floyd: to teach him to behave and accept the presence of other

REMOTE BEHAVIOR CONSULTATION

PETFAX. The \$206 fee includes two months of follow-up consultations. Call 508.887.4640 or visit www.tufts.edu/vet/petfax to obtain a behavior history form.

VETFAX. Call 508.887.4678 for more information or to obtain behavior history forms for you and your pet's veterinarian to complete. The veterinarian determines your fee.

people. But it'll probably be a battle for the rest of his life," states Moon-Fanelli. She recommends a basket muzzle to offer human safety while allowing Floyd to eat, drink, and pant. Then, using a foam model of a dog head, she proceeds to explain the mechanics of the Gentle Leader™, a dog headcollar and leash designed to facilitate training. Suddenly Floyd lunges, growling, toward the photographer who until now has been quietly snapping shots without incident. The client jerks his leash, murmuring, "Knock it off." Moon-Fanelli turns this into a teaching moment, modeling an assertive cease-and-desist command as she demonstrates upward pressure on the leash. She hands the collar to the woman, who miraculously fits it onto Floyd's head. Noting subtle changes in the dog's body language, Moon-Fanelli is satisfied that he has begun to get the message. Cottam escorts the woman and the dog outside to teach her how to handle the leash and let her practice.

"MY DOG'S A GLUGGER."

Dogs are seen more than cats at the Animal Behavior Clinic, and fear aggression is a common problem, as are obsessive-compulsive disorders. There has been the occasional mystery. One of Dodman's patients was, as

described by its owner, a "glugger": It would stand bug-eyed in the middle of the kitchen floor, gulping repeatedly; race around the perimeter of the kitchen like a canine vacuum cleaner eating dust and who knows what else; gulp some more; bolt outside to eat clumps of grass and dirt; then abruptly return to normal. A physical exam turned up no clues.

Then, Dodman says, "the bout-like nature of the behavior got me thinking that it could be a partial seizure, the first one I'd seen in the lateral part of the hypothalamus, the area of the brain that controls foraging, appetite, eating, and swallowing." So he tried an anti-convulsant drug, and the behavior stopped. Soon afterwards a different client told Dodman his dog was a "snoofer." Seeing the same behavior on the videotape, he treated it the same way with the same result. After he published a paper on the cases, other veterinarians wrote to him that they, too, had seen that same behavior; mystery solved.

Now, with a new \$45K state-of-the-art electroencephalography (EEG) unit at Cummings—a gift from clients Jan Corning and Mac Emory of Rockport, Maine, and the American Foundation of Cleveland, Ohio—Dodman and Maurer are able to go beyond hypotheses as they compare the EEGs of gluggers and snoofers with those of

normal animals. With respect to OCD, he and Moon-Fanelli are part of a multi-institutional, multidisciplinary team looking for the culprit gene in animals, a finding they hope crosses over to humans. Another potential cross-over is one of the clinic's most successful OCD drug therapies, which Tufts patented for animals; a human application is being tested at McLean Hospital.

MULTIPLE SUCCESS FACTORS

Drug therapy is often indicated for aggression cases, too, and Floyd is no exception. "When the behavior is already serious," explains Maurer, "combining pharmaceutical and behavioral treatment is necessary to help stabilize the dog, facilitate the learning process, and make it less reactive." Treatment also includes a diet change and at least twenty minutes of aerobic exercise a day to help exert a calming effect on the brain. In the end, Floyd's prognosis depends on the owners' motivation and competence to see him through a long, gradual process. Some people, facing a long road ahead, simply give up. But owners who see their pet as a lifelong member of the family will turn their own lives around to help the animal. Regular sessions with a trainer can make all the difference in providing weekly hands-on guidance as well as obedience training. Moon-Fanelli, adamant that all owners seek a highly competent trainer to work with, refers Floyd to one she knows is up to the task of handling him.

A pet's behavior can make or break its relationship with its family, yet promoting the value of behavioral services within the context of veterinary care remains a challenge. The goal is to raise people's awareness that change is possible, educate them on what it takes to effect that change, and counter the quick-fix mentality promoted by mass-marketed behavior approaches. Moon-Fanelli expects this will take stronger collaboration between the Animal Behavior Society, which certifies animal behaviorists who meet strict professional criteria, and the American College of Veterinary Behavior (ACVB) which board-certifies veterinary behaviorists. Early detection of behavioral issues would be a major step forward, she states, "because when we see an animal, it's normally had a problem for at least a couple of years. And of course the longer it goes on, the more difficult it is to change." **TVM**

WHY BORDER COLLIES HERD YOUR GUESTS

ARE CERTAIN BREEDS OF DOG PREDISPOSED TO CERTAIN BEHAVIORS? CERTAINLY, SAYS Dr. Nicholas Dodman. "The AVMA board examination in behavior even includes a list of breeds and a list of behaviors, and you have to match them." He explains that, generations ago, many breeds of dogs were selectively bred to meet a particular need. Dogs with a high prey drive, for example, were bred for herding, so they're prone to chasing things that move. "A border collie will herd your guests or children running around in your back yard," he states.

Breeds originally selected for protection and guarding tend to be more territorial and can have a lower threshold for aggression. The bull mastiff came about because game wardens needed a powerful dog to help them capture poachers. A Rottweiler, originally bred to herd cattle, was then bred to protect against bandits who attacked cattle farmers returning home with their profits. The Doberman pinscher was originally bred to protect a tax collector/dog officer/undertaker as he made his rounds. The Lhasa Apso was bred to guard royalty.

Predispositions notwithstanding, it's a breed's suitability for its environment and the owner-animal dynamic that govern how any one animal will behave. Responding to the notion of banning breeds (such as pit bulls), Dodman offers this analogy: "A sports car in the hands of a young, inexperienced male trying to impress friends in the car with him is a very bad setup. The sports car itself is not the problem; it's the combination. It's the same with a pit bull: On its own it isn't a problem, but if its owner is either unaware or deliberately ignorant of what it takes to 'drive' that particular dog, you can end up with a bad combination."