

Encouraging Owners to Seek Treatment for Canine Behavioural Problems: An Assessment of the Impact on the Relinquishment of Dogs

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Introduction

In the United States, 3-4 million dogs are relinquished to shelters each year (Luescher & Medlock, 2009). Behavioural problems are the most frequent reason cited as for relinquishment (Salman *et al.*, 1998; Cottam *et al.*, 2008). Although it has been previously shown that the treatment of behavioural problems helps to decrease canine relinquishment rates, only a relatively small proportion of pet owners participate in activities to address these problems (Cottam *et al.*, 2008; Shore *et al.*, 2008). Ongoing research is being conducted to explore how more owners can be encouraged to address their dogs' behavioural problems.

Discussion

Highlighting the importance of owners addressing such behavioural problems, current areas of research have investigated factors that influence an owner's willingness to seek treatment (Shore *et al.*, 2008), the effectiveness of remote consultation on canine separation anxiety (Cottam *et al.*, 2008), and a risk assessment of factors often associated with dogs being relinquished post-adoption (Diesel *et al.*, 2008).

Shore *et al.* (2008) conducted a study in which they explored how dog owners assessed the seriousness of common pet behaviour problems, the likelihood that these owners would address these behaviours and what method they would choose to obtain advice. Here, 85 dog owners were asked to rate 13 common behavioural problems both in terms of severity and the likelihood that they would seek advice for the problem. The owners were then presented with 12 services they could use to assist them with behavioural problems and asked to rate how likely they would be to use each of the services. Owners selected aggression toward people as the most serious behavioural problem. Fear of people, storms or loud noises was ranked as the least serious behaviour. There was no clear correlation between the seriousness of the behavioural problem and the likelihood that the owner would seek help for it, so more research is needed to explore what drives dog owners to seek advice for behavioural problems.

Until such time as these factors are known, an increased number of dogs remain at a heightened risk for relinquishment. Finally, the owners ranked free services higher than fee-based services to assist with behavioural problems. Although seemingly evident, the dog owners opting for free services over pay services is useful in that it provides a framework to consider how best to develop and promote free services, such as web sites or help lines for owners who decide not to address a behavioural problem because of cost. By giving such an owner access to free services, relinquishment rates may correspondingly decrease as a result of options other than relinquishment being open to them. From the veterinary behaviourist's perspective, it may be initially difficult to incorporate the concept of a less expensive system into current business practice models, with the incentive for doing so resting primarily with a benevolent desire to help those animals at risk.

Yet, just as cost may limit an owner's access to behavioural advice (Shore *et al.*, 2008), so too can distance, especially for those owners living in underserved or isolated populations (Cottam *et al.*, 2008). Investigating this idea, Cottam *et al.* (2008) explored the validity of remote consultation for the treatment of canine separation anxiety. Separation anxiety was chosen because of its ubiquitous nature as a behavioural problem and its potentially deleterious effect on the human-animal bond that often can lead to relinquishment. In this study, Cottam *et al.* (2008) compared the efficacy of treatment for separation anxiety by traditional in-person clinic consultation with a board-certified veterinary behaviourist or certified applied animal behaviourist with that of treatment through "PetFax", a remote

consultation service through which owners and a certified applied animal behaviourist communicated by email or fax. Four variables were investigated to discern significant differences between dogs treated remotely and those treated in a clinic: (1) pre- and post-treatment anxiety scores; (2) owner-reported improvement; (3) percentage of rehomed, relinquished or euthanized dogs; and (4) clarity of communication with owners. No significant differences were found between the two consultation methods, with each group demonstrating a significant reduction in separation anxiety. While strictly limited to canine separation anxiety, this study demonstrated that remote consultation is a viable alternative to assist in addressing a specific behavioural problem. Moreover, it provides a springboard for further research into whether other behavioural problems can also be addressed remotely, which in turn, could lead to a decrease in canine relinquishment.

Similarly, an owner's willingness to address a dog's behavioural problem is also an important factor in preventing re-relinquishment post-adoption. Examining this issue, Diesel *et al.* (2008) conducted a risk assessment of factors often associated with the re-relinquishment of dogs post-adoption in the United Kingdom. This prospective cohort study sampled 5,750 dogs rehomed by Dogs Trust during 2005. The study followed the progress of the adopted dogs for 6 months post-adoption in order to explore the factors that impact a successful rehoming. Here, 14% of the owners reported that the adoption had failed. Behavioural problems were most frequently cited as the reason for re-relinquishment, underscoring their importance in successful rehoming. More specifically, the results revealed that if a dog displayed aggressive tendencies towards people and the owner did not address the problem, the new owners were 11.1 times more likely to relinquish the dog. Likewise, the results also revealed that attendance at a post-adoption training class significantly reduced the odds that a dog would be relinquished, a finding that, in part, may be due to a strengthening of the human-animal bond (Diesel *et al.*, 2008). Taken together, these findings suggest that shelters could decrease re-relinquishment rates by requiring that owners attend a post-adoption training class, particularly one that offers an opportunity for owners to seek behavioural advice (Diesel *et al.*, 2008).

Conclusion

Recently, research has been conducted to explore the impact of encouraging owners to address their dogs' behavioural problems with the hope that fewer dogs consequently will be relinquished. Measures such as free advice help lines, remote consultations and mandatory post-adoption training classes may serve to promote better access to behavioural advice, strengthen the human-animal bond and decrease canine relinquishment rates.

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