

My Dog Mia

By Michelle Posage, DVM



My dogs are not always well-behaved. They are good pets, but they are not perfect.

This is might be surprising to some who know me as a veterinary behaviorist. There is a general expectation that my own pets should benefit from what I do as a profession. And they do, but not always in an obvious way. Let me tell you about my dog, Mia.

Because I have worked in an animal shelter and support the cause of finding homes for unwanted animals, both of my own dogs came from rescue organizations. In fact, bringing home abandoned animals is an occupational hazard for many of us in the veterinary profession. This was a good thing for my oldest dog, Mia, since most people would have found her an overwhelming burden due to chronic medical and behavioral issues.

Mia is now in her teens. She survived the medical problems she faced 8 years ago when I brought her home, and after months of intensive therapy, she was successfully treated for separation anxiety. This was no small feat considering that her anxiety was once so severe that she urinated and defecated on the floor, chewed door knobs off of doors, barked excessively, and drooled puddles on the floor. Now, she hardly takes notice of us when we prepare to leave the house. In fact, the only reason she pays attention is so she knows when to sneak onto the couch for a comfortable nap.

Mia has definitely come a long way. But if her arthritic legs would let me take her for a walk around the block, she would still try to lunge and bark at the sight of every dog. She has done this from first day I brought her home, and she will always do this. I can usually divert her from the other dog when I am on top of things, but she will sometimes ignore me in favor having her say. It is frustrating, but I haven't really done much to change her behavior in this regard.

Actually, I decided a long time ago to accept this shortcoming in Mia's behavior since it would not easily be undone after years of someone else's neglect. I chose to manage the problem by taking precautions to keep her away from other dogs. For the most part, this approach has been more successful than behavior modification could have ever been. Although she is not a dog that I can let off the leash or even take for hikes on trails where other dogs might be running free, this has had minimal impact on her quality of life since long walks made her legs ache anyway. A game of fetch in the backyard has always been enough to keep her happy.

Even though many in my profession may be hesitant to admit it, I know I am not alone in having a pet with less than perfect behavior. Why do behaviorists, dog trainers, and other pet professionals sometimes have pets with undesirable behavior? One reason might be because they know that animals have a tendency to behave like animals. They understand that their furry family members are not little people and they play by a different rule book.

Pet owners with a really good understanding of animal behavior may not always try to change their pet's animal instincts, but they definitely do not ignore them. It can be dangerous not to respect behavior that comes naturally to animals. For example, denying that a frightened dog or cat has the potential to bite may set the pet up for failure by not taking the proper precautions.

Unfortunately, not all pet behavior problems can be successfully prevented or cured, but management can be a successful option. A veterinary behaviorist can help you decide which direction to take by evaluating your pet along with the environmental factors that impact prognosis. He or she will give you a clear understanding of what causes the behavior problem and find the right combination of treatment and management to give your pet the best chance of a long, happy life in your home.

Dr. Michelle Posage is a veterinary behaviorist at the Animal Medical Center of New England, a specialty and emergency animal hospital. For more information or to schedule a personal consultation with Dr. Posage call 603.821.7222 or go to www.amcne.com.