

PROTOCOL FOR PREVENTING AND TREATING ATTENTION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

Don't All Dogs and Cats Ask for Attention?

Many dogs and cats frequently solicit attention from their people. For some of these dogs and cats, the intent is just to interact with their people. For others, the attention seeking may be more about seeking reassurance.

Unfortunately, responding to the pet's pesky behavior can contribute to worsening attention-seeking behavior and anxiety, when they are linked.

The manner in which pets seek attention can affect the manner in which the people interact with them. Pets who receive little attention from their people, those who are particularly needy for attention, and those who may never have had any guidelines set about what is acceptable behavior (and this varies among households) may resort to extremes to get attention.

Dogs may jump on their people, constantly nudge them, pull at their clothing, nip at them, or bark at them. Cats may scratch people, paw at them, pull their clothing, howl, pounce, or stroll up and down their person's body when that person is asleep. Sometimes the pets become destructive or eliminate in inappropriate places. Both cats and dogs can learn to steal objects or knock them from "forbidden surfaces" if this gets them attention. When sweet behaviors do not elicit attention, many cats will scratch furniture because they know that it will result in someone chasing them. If the cat needs that kind of a game, there are more suitable ways to meet their needs, but the human needs to be a willing partner.

When Is Asking for Attention a Sign of Distress?

It is important to remember that if an animal is severely needy for attention, for whatever reason, he will get that attention by any means possible. For an animal who craves attention—whether it's just because they want to play or because they are so anxious they need constant reassurance—even negative attention is better than none. There is a parallel with children: if the only attention a young child gets is through a kick, the child will return for that kick.

We don't want to encourage misbehavior to satisfy a need for attention. *Pets who are overly anxious are not just misbehaving, they are abnormal, and "negative" attention can make them worse.* For animals who are anxious, inadvertent "rewards" of the anxious behaviors may actually worsen the anxiety. Most often, the person giving the attention is unaware of its effect on anxiety. In fact, when people become aware of their dog's or cat's true "need" for attention, they provide reassurance for their pet without observing whether that reassurance is making their dog or cat calmer. If it is not, we need to address the problem.

Those of us who love our pets tend to automatically reach out to touch any animal who brushes against us. We are more likely to do this if we are otherwise occupied by reading a newspaper, napping, or watching TV. Particularly pushy, but normal, cats and dogs know about this and show up for attention at such times.

For anxious animals, the competing stimulus of a TV may make the dog or cat more anxious because he is not the entire

focus of his human's attention. Here, the dog or cat keeps pestering the human because he *needs, not just wants,* attention, and most people are sufficiently distracted that they do not realize that their cat or dog is distressed.

Finally, please remember that *rehomed and rescued animals and those from shelters may have been abandoned because they wanted attention too much.* Unfortunately, abandonment made them more anxious and now they want attention even more. The behaviors used by these rehomed pets to seek attention often drive people away. Please don't let these dogs and cats be victimized by their own neediness and abandonment!

What Can We Do to Help Dogs and Cats Who Seek Attention Because They Are Needy and Distressed?

Treatment of attention-seeking behavior involves the same rules that succeed in preventing it. Most of these problematic behaviors can be overcome using the following instructions in combination with the **Protocol for Deference** and the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**.

Although most attention-seeking behaviors are not dangerous, they are annoying, and annoying behaviors are what people complain most about. Shelters are full of animals for whom complaints about "annoying behaviors" were the only problem. *Any behavioral concern can be life-threatening, so it is critical to improve any annoying behavior.*

Specific Steps for Fixing Attention-Seeking Behavior

1. Establish a regular schedule of interaction.
 - Some degree of predictability is particularly important for anxious animals.
 - For at least 5 to 15 minutes twice daily pay attention to your cat or dog at a regular time. Scheduling this interaction will make it easier to do and will allow you both to look forward to it.
 - During this time teach your dog or cat obedience exercises (cats learn to fetch quite well for a food treat), tricks, target training (go to www.abrionline.org for some videos), relaxation exercises, walk them or otherwise encourage aerobic exercise. If you have a treadmill you may be able to teach your dog to use it.
 - If your pet's style is more sedentary, the attention can involve grooming, massage, or petting and talking.
 - Behavior modification exercises designed to teach a pet to sit, stay, and relax can help.

These suggestions all provide an opportunity to strengthen the bond you have with your pet. Combined with an improved understanding of the pet's needs and behaviors, you'll be more patient and more receptive to your pet's needs.
2. Tailor the type of interaction to both your and your pet's needs. Very young puppies and kittens have a huge requirement for aerobic, interactive play. A walk will not fix this, but throwing a ball or Frisbee, or dragging a toy on a rope, might.

3. If your young, energetic pet eats kibble, do not “meal feed” them. Instead, use a “treat ball” or food toy (Buster Cube, Roll-A-Treat Ball, Planet Toy) filled with kibble to give your cat or dog physical exercise and mental stimulation.
4. The exuberance of youth will turn into obnoxious attention-seeking behavior if the dog’s or cat’s needs are not met. Structured time for play and attention provides an outlet for the pet, but also ensures that you do not feel guilty when you want some quiet, non-pet time to yourself.

All of these suggestions should decrease your pet’s “need” to solicit attention through inappropriate or undesirable behaviors, while providing more calming and beneficial attention than he likely receives now.

This Makes Sense, But How Do I Discourage the Problematic Behaviors?

You will need some method to reinforce your pet’s good behavior and another to discourage the undesirable behavior at times when you are not specifically focused on interaction.

If your cat or dog demands attention by using one of their problematic behaviors, ignore her. She will start to offer other behaviors as a way to ask you a question about what action of hers will gain your attention. At some point the offered behavior will involve being quiet and looking at you. As soon as your pet is quiet, ask her to sit, then tell her she is brilliant and sweet and give her a caress or treat. If you now wish to interact extensively with your cat or dog, you can, but you should be able to say “no” without being mauled or bothered.

Be aware of two relevant behavioral phenomena: extinction and resistance to extinction.

- When you do not respond to behaviors you don’t like, you are using extinction (performance of behavior = no response) to encourage the dog or cat to stop the behavior.
- If you are distracted and break your “no response” rule and accidentally give the dog or cat any attention for the behavior you are trying to extinguish, your cat or dog will go right back to the old behaviors. This is resistance to extinction, and it encourages your dog or cat to continue to exhibit obnoxious behavior.

Whatever you do, do not physically push your pet down or off. If you don’t want your cat or dog to struggle with you, do not struggle with her. If your dog or cat physically struggles with you, someone has encouraged such behavior, albeit often accidentally. If your pet doesn’t automatically sit when you don’t respond to the pesky behavior, slough her off (stand up or back up and let her slide from you) and softly say “No (or use whatever word or sound works for her as a disruptive signal), off and sit, please.” As soon as the dog or cat sits, say “Good girl!” If she acts like a jack-in-the-box and comes back jumping, move further away and refuse to interact until she sits again. Then repeat the reward. If you are consistent, your cat or dog will learn that only calm behavior is rewarded with attention.

Where Are the Pitfalls?

Do not push your pet down or shove her away using your feet. Dogs, especially, will interpret this as play and will interpret this “correction” as fun and nip and grab more, not less.

Cats are very good at getting people to play with them using their feet: every time their person moves a foot, the cat plays back by grabbing it again. It is important to stand still to stop your cat from playing the foot game. If your dog or cat does not give up, walk away.

Cats will nibble on people for attention when sitting in someone’s lap or when you are asleep. Gently slough these cats from your lap or move them off the bed by moving the bed covers. Ensure that the cat cannot interpret your response as play. Do not talk to the cat, just withdraw attention. Cats and dogs will use their newfound mental space to think about the situation and invariably offer another behavior. You can shape these offerings into more and more acceptable behaviors.

What If Passive Responses Fail?

If you do them correctly and consistently these passive measures will fix your problem. Occasionally they may not. If these passive measures do not stop the annoying behavior, you can try to interrupt it. Before you do this you need to consider three things:

1. you need to make sure that no one has been rewarding the pesky behavior,
2. you need to make sure that you are not angry and are not going to scare or injure your cat or dog, and
3. you need to make sure that your timing for interrupting an animal is excellent. Timing is critical here, because to stop the behavior, you need to interrupt the animal **as the behavior is starting**.

You need to use the lowest level of interruption necessary to get the pet to stop the behavior: for some dogs and cats this is a whisper, for some it’s a loud “shhh.” There are two rules you cannot violate:

1. you cannot scare your pet and
2. the earlier in the sequence of their attention-seeking behaviors that you interrupt your dog or cat, the better will be her response.

If you need to be reminded to pay close attention to your pet, fit them with a breakaway collar with bells (Bear Bells: www.rei.com).

As soon as your dog or cat stops the behavior that you dislike, you *must* offer her a more appropriate form of engagement (e.g., sitting for a reward, chasing a ball, a massage, et cetera).

Can Actively Disrupting the Behavior Backfire?

Yes, interrupting your pet can backfire. If your pet becomes aggressive when you try to interrupt or stop these attention-seeking behaviors you have more—and more serious—problems than you thought. *Seek help from a specialist immediately and cease any interruption or “reprimand.” Continuing to attempt to interrupt such behaviors under these circumstances is inhumane and will make your pet worse.*

If your pet still persists, but is not aggressive, consider banishing her to another, neutral room. You can effectively banish pets by removing yourself to a place they cannot go. Remember that these dogs and cats are desperate for attention and the worst “punishment” that they can receive is to be deprived of the potential to get attention.

- Do not cuddle with your pet or verbally reassure her that you are not a bad person while you are leaving her behind.
- Do not leave your pet in isolation for extended periods. You wish to leave her only long enough for her to calm.
- Give your pet a chance to demonstrate that she can respond appropriately. When your cat or dog is quiet, let her out and reward a more appropriate behavior (e.g., sitting, or waiting for grooming).

Any Final Words of Wisdom? Should We Not Just Let Sleeping Dogs Lie?

The final step in this treatment of attention-seeking behavior is the *easiest and most frequently ignored step*: reward your dog or cat when she is spontaneously calm. People tend to ignore their cats and dogs when they are sleeping or being good, because they are so used to them being pesky and don't want to arouse them. This is unfortunate, because this is the perfect time to talk calmly to your cat or dog and, if she stretches out, rub her belly. Your pet is now doing exactly what you wish she would do more often—being quiet and loving—so encourage her.

Finally, especially for dogs, this type of appropriate behavior can be reinforced daily by requiring that the dog briefly defer to you by sitting and staying for anything she may want, including love, grooming, eating, going out, playing, having a leash put on, being petted, or even having a wound examined (see the **Protocol for Deference**). This is an excellent start to teaching your dog to take all the cues as to the appropriateness of her behavior from you. All dogs

should learn this, and any dog older than 6 weeks of age can learn it quickly. Make sure that as soon as your dog's bottom hits the ground you tell her that she is wonderful, because she is!

Tick List

1. Regular interaction schedule, which can be playing, grooming, massaging, checking for ticks, et cetera:
 - 5 to 15 minutes in AM and
 - 5 to 15 minutes in PM.
2. Say “no” gently and slough the dog or cat off. This is the most “severe correction” you should have to use.
3. Do not push down or off.
4. If your dog or cat persists, you can try to interrupt her using a noise or action that stops the behavior but does not scare the pet. Use interruptive behaviors judiciously. Be careful: a loud noise can make a noise reactive or noise phobic animal worse. Watch your pet's behavior: If your dog or cat acts fearful, you stepped over the line. The interruption should just be enough to stop your dog or cat so she looks to you and then you *must immediately reward* with treats and praise. **You must do no harm.**
5. If still persistent, banish your pet. Release and reinforce good behavior when quiet.
6. Reward whenever quiet and calm, even when your dog is sleeping. Is this calm behavior the kind of behavior you want? If so, encourage it.
7. Reinforce, by reward, the importance of sitting and looking at you for cues about the appropriateness of your pet's behaviors at all times.