



Veterinary Behaviorist Dr. Amy Pike on Common Behavior Problems in Dogs and How to Work with a Veterinary Behaviorist



Dr. Amy Pike is one of less than 100 board-certified veterinary behaviorists around the globe.

► **What are the most common types of troubled behavior you are seeing in dogs?**

Fears or phobias and aggression are the two most common types of behavior problems that I see in canines. If I had to break it down to the two most common diagnoses, it would be fear-based aggression toward unfamiliar people and fear-based aggression toward unfamiliar dogs. A close third would be separation anxiety.

► **What in your professional experience are the top reasons we are seeing so many troubled dogs?**

The level of expectations placed on the canine species we share our homes with has evolved over the years I have been in practice. We used to treat dogs like dogs—they did dog things, and we understood this as the dog just being a dog. Now, owners tend to treat dogs more like human children. While this has been good in some respects with owners now investing much more into the care and welfare of their pets, it has come with some unrealistic expectations of their pets, as well. For example, I constantly hear from owners who say that their dog should never growl at or bite someone. I explain how aggression is merely a behavioral strategy, and that while this is an unwanted behavior from our standpoint, it is a very normal behavior for a dog to employ when they are scared or lack control over their body or environment. When the owners understand the emotional underpinnings of aggression, it makes more sense to them why their dog feels certain ways about things (ways that human kids do not).

I also think that the rescue and no-kill sheltering movement has shifted things in our world, as well. When I was first in practice 20 years ago, shelters and rescue organizations would not have adopted out many of the patients that I see get adopted out on a daily basis. If there was any inkling of aggression or behavior problems, either historical or present in the shelter, the animal was euthanized. Again, this is one of



Many modern dog owners treat their dogs like human children, without understanding the important ways a dog's emotions and reactions differ from those of a human child.

those shifts that is really a double-edged sword. Many of the pets that would have previously been euthanized, if placed in the right environment and ensuring their needs were being met, could have easily been adopted out. Unfortunately, the shift, in some cases, has gone too far the other way, and I see animals adopted out that are downright dangerous, impossible to live with, suffering with emotional disorders, or are simply adopted into the wrong family or environment.

► **Can owners schedule an appointment directly with a veterinary behaviorist or are most appointments referrals from other veterinarians? What do veterinary behaviorists need most from dog owners before and during an appointment?**

Owners can absolutely schedule an appointment with a veterinary behaviorist directly. However, most of my clients come from referrals from their veterinarian or trainer when it is realized that the problem goes above and beyond something a general practitioner or a qualified trainer can handle.

The biggest thing that I ask of my clients is open, honest communication. I need them to tell me if they may have

reacted to their dog in a way that was not ideal (for example, hitting or yelling at the dog, shocking it for performing certain behaviors, etc.) so we can not only discuss how they can modify their own behavior in the future, but understand why things may have worsened after that response. I also need them to be honest with me about how much time and financial and emotional effort they can put into a treatment plan. If they have already reached their breaking point for rehoming or behavioral euthanasia, it is important that I know this so I can appropriately support them as well. And while I ask that honesty of them, I am also honest with them—if this pet can no longer live in their home or truly needs a better environment to thrive, I will tell them that.

► **Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future well-being of our pet dogs?**

I am highly optimistic about the future well-being of our pet dogs. I think the newest generation of pet owners is more highly committed to their pet's welfare than ever before. Not only that, but they are much more open to seeking care from a veterinary behaviorist and including psychotropic medication as a part of that treatment plan, to the benefit of our anxious canine companions. I am also seeing a big shift away from aversive training techniques in the up-and-coming generations—they may not understand the specifics as to why we want to avoid using those techniques and tools, but their brains, their guts, and their hearts tell them to not use these methods on their beloved family members.

► **What do you love most about your work?**

The connections I get with the families. We joke that we often know our clients are pregnant before their own family does because we get involved helping to prepare the pet for the impending change. We hear about kids graduating from college, heading off into the military, or the sister-in-law who won't move out of their basement, etc. To be such an integral part of that pet's life is such an honor that my clients grant me each and every day. It's why I get out of bed every day.