

Why it might be time to get rid of that food bowl for your dog, cat or bird!

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Could encouraging pets to use their brain more also improve their behaviour?

A recent post by Dr Belinda The Vet (Anxiety in Puppies May 2014) written after she attended the AVA conference in Perth featuring the ever popular behavioural Vets Dr's Gary Landsbery and Kersti Seksel, has given me the lead I needed to write this particular series of blog posts.

The presentation that caught Dr Belinda's attention for her post provided some interesting statistics. For example, to meet the behavioural needs of puppies, their day needs to be roughly divided up into groups as listed on this lovely graphic below (reproduced with permission and courtesy of Dr Belinda the Vet).



Puppies should spend 6 hours a day foraging & eating

You will notice that 12.5% of the puppies time should be spent eating, while another 12.5% of their day should be spent scavenging/hunting - this 12.5% equates to 3 hours a day. Since we tend to just give new puppies (and kittens) food from a bowl 2-3 times daily which is then summarily vacuumed up in a matter of minutes (if you have a slow eater!) is it any wonder puppies and kittens get into trouble?

It is really interesting talking to people about trying a different method of feeding as they often feel a sense of guilt towards their pets and want their pet to feel loved. The owner feels the only way to show love is by giving the pet the food in a bowl along with lots of un-earned treats.

There seems to be a reluctance to get our pets to "work" for their dinner as we have been indoctrinated for decades to feed our pets from a bowl. It is what we are used to and it is a hard habit to break, besides that fact, people are often lazy and will often take what looks like the easy option. An interesting phenomenon I have noticed too is the same people that reject treat training are the same people that are reluctant to feed their pet in an other way than from a bowl.

The veterinary industry therefore needs to sell the benefits of not feeding straight from a bowl.....and one good selling point is the prevention of behaviour issues, and well it's just plain boring eating out of a bowl.

It's all about prevention...

Vets are about preventative medicine, vaccinations, preventative dentals, heartworm prevention, flea prevention and the list goes on; we may be able to prevent some boredom, aggression and anxiety related behaviour just by changing the way we feed our pets.

I can't say I have any scientific evidence to back up my personal thoughts but it tends to make sense (although it is written about in many enrichment books for animals kept in captivity for zoos etc) to give the puppy / kitten / bird something constructive to do so it won't then become destructive.

Along with the force free training movement which is about showing the animal what it is that you want it to do with rewards and attention, rather than punishing them for what you don't want them to do, providing behavioural enrichment by means of slow feeders, food dispensing toys and intelligent interactive toys also gives the pet something to do that is acceptable for the owner.



Brains need a work out

We actually do not give our pets enough credit for having brains, brains that need a work out. They truly enjoy working things out. A famous made-for-TV-entertainment dog training personality likes to tell people that we need to give our dogs more exercise. Now whilst I cannot disagree with that sentiment, the suggestion he makes is we have to physically exhaust our dogs so they won't have any energy to misbehave. This totally forgets about one very important organ all living beings possess and need to use – the brain. Mental stimulation is as good as, if not better than physical stimulation at tiring a being out and this also applies to our pets although the average pet owner rarely gives their pet a chance to utilise that awesome organ.



By providing behaviour enrichment we can not only provide the animal with entertainment, we can also boost their confidence by enabling them to solve problems. Being able to solve problems enables them to cope better when faced with certain situations later on..... Can you see where I am going here with regards to prevention now?

Educate while they're young

For those vets running puppy & kitten classes (and those super people that run Parrot parties too) this is an ideal time to educate pet owners about more exciting and natural ways of feeding our pets. The owners don't necessarily have to spend a fortune doing this either as it is just a matter of thinking outside the square or rather the bowl, only limited by imagination.



It can be something as simply as scattering or hiding food all over the back yard for puppies or creating tracking course for both cats and dogs.

There are all sorts of ways and items that help with slowing down feeding and helping with the desire to hunt and scavenge. Within the veterinary industry it is up to us at that very first puppy / kitten visit to encourage pet parents to throw away that food bowl, or at the very least only use it once or twice a week (I think there is still a need to feed from food bowls, so it probably is not wise to throw the bowl away completely).



Gillian Shippen is a veterinary nurse with a passion for enriching the lives of pets. She has her own website 'Pets Need a Life Too!' where she sells a range of enrichment toys for pets, including wheelchairs for dogs. She is always happy to advise pet owners and those in the veterinary industry on the best enrichment toys to help improve the lives of ALL pets.

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