

Managing the risk of aggressive dog behavior

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Aggressive behaviour in pet dogs is a serious problem for dog owners across the world, with bite injuries representing a serious risk to both people and other dogs. New research by the University of Bristol has explored the factors that influence how owners manage aggressive behaviour in their dogs. The study found that clinical animal

behaviourists should focus on helping dog owners to feel confident in the effectiveness of the behaviour modification techniques that they recommend and, in their ability, to actually use them successfully.

Dogs are the most popular pet in the UK, with 31 per cent of households owning one or more [dogs](#). However, the majority of [dog owners](#) find some aspect of their pet's [behaviour](#) problematic and behavioural disorders are often mentioned as the main reason dogs are given to rehoming organisations.

The aim of the study was to find out what influences an owner's decision to use outdated punishment-based methods and what the barriers and drivers were to dog owners using [positive reinforcement](#)-based solutions. In particular, the researchers wanted to explore whether theoretical models and psychological concepts used in other contexts could help them to understand this issue.

Current evidence suggests that positive reinforcement-based behaviour modification techniques are both humane and effective in the treatment of aggressive behaviour in dogs and that the use of punishment-based techniques are likely to be detrimental to the welfare of the dog and can lead to an increase in aggression. However, many dog owners continue to use punishment-based techniques in an attempt to inhibit this problematic behaviour.

The research found owners' perceptions of how effective the behaviour modification techniques are and how effectively they feel they can apply them are key factors predicting their current and future use.

Although a lot of attention has been focussed on the consequences to the dog of using certain training techniques, this is the first-time research has systematically examined the factors influencing an owner's choice of training technique, as well as the impact of this behaviour upon the

owners of these dogs.

Dr. Emily Blackwell, Director of Companion Animal Population Health at the Bristol Veterinary School, said: "Our findings highlight the need for behaviourists to offer practical support to owners, to demonstrate the effectiveness of reward-based training and to provide them with an opportunity to practice under expert guidance, so that they feel confident in their ability to use the techniques before attempting to apply them independently.

"The study also shows the [emotional impact](#) that attempting to manage a reactive dog can have, with its associated ups and downs. It is therefore important for practitioners to consider the wellbeing of the owner as well as the dog, including the potential implications of this, when helping them along their journey."

Dr. Emma Williams, VC Fellow in Digital Innovation and Wellbeing in the School of Psychological Science, added: "The majority of research on companion animal behaviour has focused on the behaviour of the animal itself, rather than the behaviour of the owner. We believe this is the first time that psychological theories exploring how people respond to threatening situations, such as Protection Motivation Theory, have been applied to understand people's interactions with their pets."

The study has identified the potential for extreme negative emotional responses and feelings of failure experienced by owners when their dog reacts badly towards another person or dog. This provides a foundation from which, in the future, research can further explore the influence of different psychological factors on an owner's decision to use positive reinforcement techniques to manage their dog's [aggressive behaviour](#).

This research will be built on by designing and testing improved communications-based interventions that encourage engagement with

positive reinforcement-based techniques across different groups of dog owners and the various practitioners who work with them.

More information: 'Managing the risk of aggressive dog behavior: investigating the influence of owner threat and efficacy perceptions' by Emma J. Williams and Emily Blackwell in *Risk Analysis* [open access]

Provided by University of Bristol

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