

# Don't bark at me, I'm a psychologist

Unruly pets are causing owners to ask for help on the couch, says Jonathan Green



Ann and John Murphy face their counsellor with increasing annoyance as they recount their problems. Taking sidelong glances at each other, the couple's bitterness spills out. 'He takes out his frustrations on me,' complains Ann. 'He is making me ill – driving me up the wall, in fact,' John sighs, turning towards the source of his trouble.



Pet behaviour counsellor Emma Magnus

For it is Ben, a one-year-old poodle, who is on the psychologist's couch today – not his owners who are nearly at their wits' end with frustration. He sits on his haunches, giving us all a nonchalant gaze between yawns during the proceedings. We are in a Suffolk veterinary consulting room as Emma Magnus, a pet behaviour counsellor, nods while hearing of the distress Ben is causing his owners.

Ann reads out a list of grievances. Last week Ben nipped the gardener on the bottom. Only this morning he chased Leo the cat down the garden before rushing into the house, snatching all the tea bags and hiding them upstairs. The other week he ate the family's supper off the stove. He regularly takes the TV remote control, causing uproar as the family try to watch television.

But Ben is not only a compulsive thief. 'He is also sexually frustrated,' says Ann. This led to his recent castration, but all to no avail. His rebellion continued unchecked. 'I have had dogs all my life but never one like this,' says Ann.

The Murphys are here to see how they can remedy Ben's antisocial behaviour. They are among a growing number of pet owners seeking pet behaviour counsellors to mend the dysfunctional behaviour of their animals.

Last year 1,321 animals were referred to pet behaviour counsellors. 'Ten years ago, people would have thought it was odd and wacky, and not to be taken seriously,' says Pauline Appleby, of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors. The organisation was founded in 1989 and its

membership has been growing rapidly. 'Nowadays, if you take your animal to a vet and he refers you to a pet psychologist, people think it is perfectly normal.'

Ms Magnus' work is more diverse than just working with dogs. Cats are the second most preferred pet in Britain, but she has also dealt with frustrated rabbits. Then there was the hamster which was determined to escape from its cage. 'The answer was more exercise on a wheel and putting food on a stick so it had to work to eat,' she explains. Likewise, the African grey parrot which pulled all its feathers out. He was bored and simply needed more toys and to be let out of his cage more often.

The essence of dog psychology, though, is understanding the pack instinct. Problems arise when dogs challenge their human owners for "top dog status". 'They are pack animals and it is easy to give them the wrong message about who is boss,' Ms Magnus says. 'In the wild, dominant dogs lead the pack, eat first and sleep where they want. Therefore owners must never let their dogs walk through doors first and must never give them titbits of food from the table. Nor should they let their pets sleep on the furniture. Even in games of tug-of-war, never let the dog win. It shows that he or she is stronger than you.'

Ms Magnus' diagnosis of Ben the poodle is that he is an attention seeker. He pinches things like the TV remote control to gain maximum attention. A strict and dynamic programme is in order, she says. She recommends he must work to get his food as he would in the wild. His supper is to be scattered outside on the lawn. Besides, Ben is to be ignored when he pesters the family for attention. At the end of the session the Murphys are delighted. Ben, though, is lost. The couple ignore him pawing them for attention on the way out.

'If we can lead a normal life it will be wonderful,' says Ann. For Ben, not realising what lies ahead, life will never be the same again.

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