

## 5. ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR

Extract from  
Module Five



### OVERVIEW

In this module, we will cover the following topics:

- Instinctive versus learned behaviours
- Communication
- Importance of socialisation
- Behavioural problems
- Methods of corrective training

## INTRODUCTION

When working with small animals, you'll find it helpful to understand their behaviours. This will help you interact with them successfully.

Predatory animals, such as dogs and cats, have a different set of behaviours from prey animals, such as rabbits and rodents. This module will address behaviour topics from the point of view of both types of animals.

## INSTINCTIVE VERSUS LEARNED BEHAVIOURS

Animal behaviours are meant to help animals survive in the wild. Predators and prey act differently because they have different approaches to survival.

- **Predators** hunt and eat other animals as food.
- **Prey animals** try to avoid being eaten.

This should influence how you handle both types of animals.

Predators are meant to hunt their food. It's instinctive for them to be dominant and possibly aggressive. Dogs and cats typically make good pets because you, as a person, are also a predator. Your posture and other behaviours indicate that you are a fellow predator and makes them feel more confident.

You should exercise caution when working with a dog or cat that you are unfamiliar with, though. Poorly trained or previously mishandled dogs or cats can be dangerous.

Instinctive behaviours for **predators** include:

- Hunting for food
- Mating
- Territorial defence
- Pack behaviour (dogs only)

*Most* domestic dogs and cats are well behaved and will not react aggressively if you trigger an instinctive behaviour. The process of domestication includes breeding animals for specific traits, including docility.

Domestication attempts to mitigate aggressive instinctive behaviours in favour of creating pets that are able to cohabitate safely with people. This creates a new set of instinctive behaviours that's distinct in domesticated animals.

Learned behaviours for **predators** include:

- Playing gently
- Obedience training

Prey animals typically forage for food. They are defensive and easily scared. You should move slowly around prey animals, such as rodents and rabbits, because quick movements make you look like a predator. They are always on alert for predators that might try to eat them.

Instinctive behaviours for **prey animals** include:

- Searching for food
- Mating
- Hiding from or avoiding predators

Prey animals can be more difficult to teach than predatory animals. You, as a human, are a predator, and prey animals can sense this. They will learn conditioned responses, like the series of events that take place before feeding time. They'll always frighten easily if you are quick, loud, or do other things like a predator.

Learned behaviours for **prey animals** include:

- Feeding time signals
- Remaining calm during handling

### **EXERCISE 5.1**

As a human are you a predator or a prey animal? How does this affect how other animals see you?

*Answers can be found at the end of the module*

### **COMMUNICATION**

Animals use body language, sounds and smells to communicate. Both predators and prey animals have a similar set of cues that let other animals know whether they're feeling scared or confident, have found food, or want to mate.

You should understand and pay attention to these signals because it will affect how you work with animals.

It'll be easiest to work with animals that are confident and comfortable. Animals that feel safe with you will appear relaxed and breathe regularly.

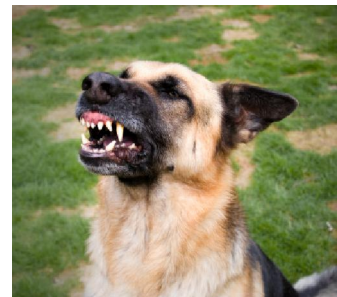
Calm cats will often purr or knead with their front paws.

Calm rodents will often appear to be chewing.

These behaviours should signal to you that the animal that you are handling is feeling secure.

In the wild, these behaviours are used to signal to other animals that everything is okay, and you should interpret them the same way.

Animals that are scared may act unpredictably. Generally, scared dogs will cower and scared cats will



flee. This isn't always the case, though, and dogs and cats may attack if they are scared or feel cornered.

If a dog or cat appears tense, is pinning its ears back and growling (dogs) or hissing (cats), they're feeling defensive and may be aggressive if you don't back down. In the wild, these behaviours are used to signal that the animal is stressed.

Scared rodents and rabbits usually freeze and may bite. These behaviours indicate that the animal is afraid and thinks it's in danger. It's acting defensively.

Animals also use smell to communicate, but it may be more difficult for you to interpret this because your sense of smell is not as keen as that of most animals. It does influence how animals interact, though, and understanding it will help you work with them.

It's easiest to see how dogs use smell to communicate. The familiar nose-to-rear greeting between two dogs is used by each dog to determine the sex, reproductive status, and other traits of the new dog.



This information is then used by each dog when they determine how to act next, whether they should attack, withdraw, attempt to mate or play.

Cats also use smells to communicate. Scent glands on the head and above the tail secrete oils that the cat spreads while it's rubbing itself on objects, including you! These scent markers mark a cat's territory and are used by cats to indicate sexual receptiveness.

Since domestic cats don't live in groups, leaving scent markers helps to minimise face-to-face interactions that are usually aggressive.

Rodents and rabbits, as prey animals, use scent markers in urine to mark territory and advertise mating readiness. Some female rodents and rabbits can become ready for mating simply by smelling the urine of a male member of the species.

## IMPORTANCE OF SOCIALISATION

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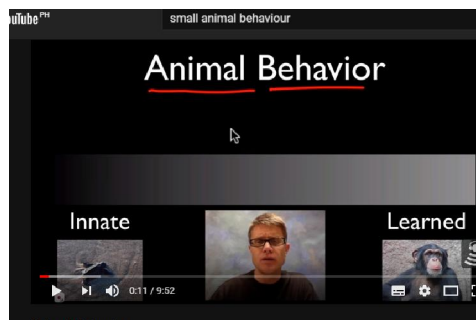
## BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

Behavioural problems are usually the result of either poor socialisation or incorrect handling and abuse or neglect. Most domesticated animals are not prone to behaving incorrectly, but will revert to instinctive behaviours when stressed simply because they don't know how to act otherwise.

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### NOW WATCH THIS VIDEO

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## METHODS OF CORRECTIVE TRAINING

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## **REMINDER**

Have you completed the following exercises?

- Exercise 5.1
- Exercise 5.2
- Exercise 5.3
- Exercise 5.4

Tick each box when you have completed the exercises. Then you can move on to the assignment that follows.

## **SUMMARY**

1. You know the difference between instinctive behaviours and learned behaviours.
2. You know the difference between how predators and prey animals behave, and why.
3. You know that animals use body language, sound and smell to communicate.
4. You know that socialisation is important to teaching an animal how to interact with people and other animals.
5. You recognise common behavioural problems and their triggers.
6. You know how to safely work with an animal with a behaviour problem.
7. You are familiar with the basic concepts of behaviour modification.

## **TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT 5**

Imagine that you are helping at a veterinary practice, and a client brings in a stray dog that has been hit by a car. The dog is obviously in pain and appears to be terrified.

First, describe what behaviours the dog might exhibit that indicate it is stressed.

Next, describe how you would approach the dog to help the vet treat it, and what precautions you should take to protect yourself from getting injured.



## **That's it, Folks**

If you want to see the rest of the module, you'll have to enroll!

Here's what else we cover in this module.

Instinctive versus learned behaviours

Communication

Importance of socialisation

Behavioural problems

Methods of corrective training

Other exercises for you to do, complete with answers.

Summary – telling you what you've learnt.

Tutor-marked assignment