

# BSAVA and BVBA behavioural advice for pet owners and veterinary professionals

The BSAVA and BVBA have put together a Q&A for pet owners to help them prepare their pets for return to normal life as lockdown eases. The information has been made available amid concerns from behaviourists and animal welfare organisations that there may be a rise in behavioural issues as lifestyle restrictions are lifted. The Q&A, which has been written for vets to pass onto their clients easily, explains what some of the key behavioural concerns are and how these can be prevented and managed.

In addition, the BSAVA has created a **COLLECTION OF RESOURCES FOR VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS** relating to the prevention, management and treatment of behavioural issues in dogs and cats, freely available in the BSAVA Library until the end of July.

## Why might easing lockdown lead to a rise in the number of pets with behavioural issues?

During lockdown our pets have become accustomed to us being at home most of the time. Roads and social spaces such as parks have been quieter, and people have had to maintain a 2m distance which has often meant that dogs have not been able to interact. As we begin to return to normal life, our pets are likely to be spending more time home alone or having to re-adjust to more people and noisier environments whilst out and about. Some pets may find this more difficult than others.

## What type of behavioural issues are we likely to see?

It is important to remember that every animal is an individual and will respond to the easing of lockdown differently, depending partly on what their lives and environments were like before and during lockdown. Some common concerns include animals becoming distressed when left at home alone if they have not been spending routine time alone during lockdown (separation-related issues), animals becoming anxious as the world around them becomes busier and noisier, and puppies – who have been at a crucial age during lockdown – potentially lacking appropriate skills when greeting dogs and animals from other households.



## How can I prevent my pet from developing separation-related issues when I return to work?

The most important thing is to help your pet feel safe and secure when left alone. You could do this by creating and providing a 'safe haven', such as a comfortable bed area ideally located in a corner of a room, or a quiet room, or a crate or den-like area. The use of puppy pens can be beneficial, especially if you need to provide individual areas—for example, if you have more than one pet, or if there are children in the home.



Image credit: Hannah Donovan

The 'safe havens' are areas with which the animal has a positive association. Providing long lasting, high value treats can be helpful to provide a positive association with being in that area. These places are ideally warm, comfortable and safe and nothing "bad" happens when the animal is in these areas.

Ideally, our pets should have continued to spend some time alone during the day throughout lockdown, but if this hasn't been possible, then it is important to start gradual re-training now. If the animal did not have their own safe haven before, you should create one in order to start your re-training.

To start teaching your dog to enjoy being in their own company, barriers like baby gates or puppy pens can be used. Ensure that the dog can still see you, but cannot get to you. This may be for something as simple as you walking into the kitchen to make a cup of tea! Ensure these tiny steps are kept positive for the dog, including using high-value long-lasting treats whilst building up to a longer period of time gradually.

## What should I do if my pet is showing signs of separation-related issues?

Signs of separation-related distress can vary from sitting still/frozen while the owner is out, not eating food or treats that have been left for them to enjoy whilst left alone, pacing, panting, whimpering and not settling, through to the more obvious signs such as being destructive, inappropriate elimination (going to the loo) or vocalising when left at home. If you think that your pet is showing signs of separation-related issues, you should contact your vet for a health check to rule out any pain or underlying issues, and then seek advice from a qualified behaviourist. To find a qualified behaviourist, visit **Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians (FABC)**, **Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC)** or **The Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (ASAB)**.

## What should I do if my pet appears nervous in busy places?

Try to avoid taking your pet to busy places if you know that they don't like it, or are not sure how they will react. Look out for subtle signs that your dog is uncomfortable such as yawning, blinking, nose licking and turning their head/body away. For more information on behaviours your dog might perform in response to a perceived threat, refer to the Ladder of Aggression (see page 3) as a guide. The purpose of these behaviours is to deflect threat and restore harmony and do not mean the dog is being dominant or submissive to others. Becoming familiar with these signs can help to pre-empt and avert potentially stressful situations.

# BSAVA and BVBA behavioural advice for pet owners and veterinary professionals

If you are planning to sit outside with your dog, consider the environment from their point of view. Take a comfortable blanket so that your dog has a designated safe, comfortable area to settle on. Take a variety of different treats for training and high-value, long-lasting treats such as food-filled toys. If using peanut butter to stuff Kongs or other toys, make sure it is free from xylitol which is poisonous to dogs.

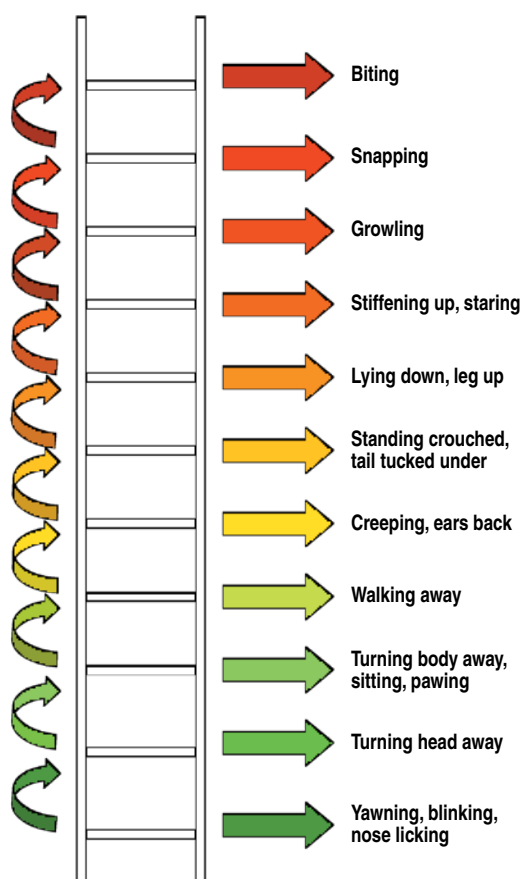
In much the same way that you would gradually build up the length of time you leave your animals at home alone, you should gradually build up to taking them to busy or noisy places to prevent them feeling overwhelmed. It is important to acknowledge your dog's concern and attempt to create a positive association with the environment using positive reinforcement, and not pressurising them beyond their comfort zone. If, your dog still shows signs of worry then increase the distance between your dog and the perceived threat/environment. If you know that your animal is scared of people and/or noises, you should contact your vet so that your animal can have a health check, and then seek advice from a qualified behaviourist. To find a qualified behaviourist, visit **FABC**, **APBC** or **ASAB**.

## What should I do if my puppy is greeting other dogs boisterously?

Puppies that haven't had the chance to socialise with other dogs during lockdown may greet dogs from other households inappropriately. It is important to teach your puppy self-control so that they are able to greet other animals, including dogs and people, calmly and appropriately. For more information visit the **Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC)** webpage, or search online to find puppy classes near you (e.g. <https://www.puppyschool.co.uk/>).

### Ladder of Aggression

How a dog reacts to stress or threat



Reproduced from the BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine, 2nd edition.