

Dog Behaviour Explained

22. Does neutering reduce aggression in male dogs?

Thoughts about male neutering are changing as the medical and behavioural evidence is better understood. Castration is never a quick fix for any behaviour problems and in many cases can make behaviour worse. Most aggression is driven through fear; in fact anxiety is the underlying emotion in many behaviour problems. Testosterone is a confidence giving drug and therefore castration is likely to make the dog more anxious and thereby increase the likelihood of aggression. Dogs showing anxiety, fear or aggression are probably best not castrated, at least until after a full behavioural analysis. However there are some specific medical conditions, such as cryptorchidism, which mean that castration should be carried out.

There are no medical benefits for early castration, so even where castration is considered, it may be a good idea to delay till after sexual and social maturity (2-3 years) and the dogs temperament is established. This will give time to see if any behaviour problems are likely to develop and if so these should be addressed first.

In female dogs, behaviour is less likely to be affected by neutering and there are stronger medical arguments to indicate that spaying is the best option in most circumstances and ideally done before her first season.

23. Should training be completed in the first 6 months?

Whilst dogs learn easiest when they are young and do not have any bad habits to overcome, training is for life and can never be considered complete. Training should start early, bearing in mind that young puppies have short attention spans. Keep it fun and teach through games so the dog enjoys learning and is motivated. Training should then be regularly practised and reinforced throughout life so the dog keeps responding as you require. Whilst food treats should still be used some times, also use life rewards e.g. asking the dog to sit and wait before opening the door to go out for his walk.

24. Do dogs understand what their owners say?

Dogs do not understand our language, except very specific words that we use repeatedly and have become associated with particular actions – either ours or theirs. However, dogs are very good at picking up our body language cues and predicting our routines which can appear like they understand what we are saying. They also have good time consciousness and know what time of the day it is and also what day of the week and know what will happen at set times. Where we have predictable behaviour or routines the dogs will associate our actions with what is about to happen and as we talk to them about what we are doing, it can appear they understand our words!

Next time, we will be answering:

Do dogs act out of spite or to annoy us?

Does early socialisation and training prevent problem behaviour later?

Does a wagging tail indicate a friendly dog?