



Does walking the dog reduce behavioral problems?

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Abstract: In order to investigate the effects of walks on dog behavior, a questionnaire divided into 4 sections was given to dog owners. Based on the 260 questionnaires collected, it was possible to create two groups: one formed by 157 dogs that made daily long walks of a duration greater than one hour (LWD) and another of 103 dogs that took short walks lasting equal to or less than one hour (SWD).

The results obtained show that the performance of a daily walk with the dog of at least one hour has a positive effect on the behavior of the animal, without having to perform sports activities. In fact, dogs that have the possibility to come out for a long walk show a more controlled and polite behavior, as they are less inclined, in a statistically significant way, to pull on a leash, jump on people and chase cats.

It is therefore useful to advise the owners of particularly excitable dogs to take long walks with their animals, if they cannot carry out sporting activities with their animals. This is particularly important for elderly owners who have physical impediments that do not allow them to perform other activities with their dogs.

Key Words: walking the dog, behavioral problems.

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Introduction

Companionship is the most common reason for owning a dog in the Western world (Bennett et al., 2007; Staats et al., 2008).

Dogs can develop a strong attachment bond not only with their conspecific (Mariti et al., 2014; 2017) but also with their owners (Mariti et al., 2013), nevertheless the onset of behavioral problems can sometimes break this relationship. Vacalopoulos & Anderson (1993) reported that up to 90% of dogs may exhibit behaviors that their owners find unacceptable: this fact can become a common cause for dogs to be abandoned and sent to the shelters (Miller et al., 1996; Serpell, 1996; Marston & Bennett, 2003; Shore et al., 2003; Shore, 2005). In fact, over 30% of shelter dogs are abandoned by their owners because of behavior problems (Wells, 2000).

In pet dogs an association between reduced prevalence of undesirable behaviors and attendance at obedience training classes (Clark & Boyer, 1993; Jagoe & Serpell, 1996), engagement with any form of training (Kobelt et al., 2003; Bennett et al., 2007) or high physical activity (Zilocchi et al., 2016) was reported.

Following on from the results of these previous studies, the aim of this research was to evaluate the effect of walking the dog on its behavior.

Material and methods

In order to investigate the effects of walks on dog behavior, a questionnaire divided into 4 sections was given to dog owners. The first section of the questionnaire regarded the dog (sex, age, reproductive status, origin), the second the owner (sex, age, level of education, profession), the third section concerned the dog management (time spent outside, type of physical activity etc.) and in the final part, 44 multiple-choice questions about dog behavior and their frequency (often, sometimes or never) were asked.

The questionnaires were collected between the months of October and November 2018; all animals were, at the time of the survey, older than one year. Statistical analysis of the data was performed with the χ^2 test.

Based on the 260 questionnaires collected, it was possible to create two groups: one group was formed by 157 dogs that made daily long walks of a duration greater than one hour (LWD) and the second group consisting of 103 dogs that took short walks lasting equal to or less than one hour (SWD). The statistical analysis did not reveal significant differences as regards the characteristics of the two groups which may constitute interfering factors for the research. Table 1 shows characteristics of the subjects in both groups.

Table 1. Characteristics of the dogs belonging to the groups examined.

	LWD N = 157	SWD N = 103	χ^2 test; p
Dog mean age \pm S.D. (months)	54.28 \pm 38.47	54.56 \pm 40.26	
Male /female dogs (n)	66/87	53/ 50	1.39; 0.238
Male dogs castrated (%)	20.4%	13.6%	1.24; 0.265
Female dogs neutered (%)	35.7%	30.1%	0.63; 0.426
Mongrel dogs (n)	32	29	1.68; 0.195

Results

For brevity, only the results related to excessive agitation and arousal behaviors will be taken into consideration. The percentages of dogs of two groups showing sometimes and often these undesirable behaviors are reported in table 2.

Table 2. Percentages of dogs of two groups showing sometimes and often the undesirable behaviors.

Behavior	LWD %	SWD %	χ^2 test; p
Making too many greetings to the owners when they return	48.6	51.4	4.32; 0.038
Jumping up to the owners (not on their return)	34.4	65.6	9.02; 0.003
Jumping up to another person	33.3	66.7	10.16; 0.001
Escaping from home	0	100	10.29; 0.001
Digging	50.0	50.0	n.s.
Persistently licking other body parts of the owner	59.6	40.4	n.s.
Pulling on a leash	47.5	52.5	4.09; 0.044
Insistently licking him/herself	62.5	37.5	n.s.
Being very agitated and excitable	51.3	48.7	n.s.
Chasing cats	69.2	30.8	3.86; 0.05
Barking at another dogs	68.8	31.3	n.s.

Discussion

Today, many companion dogs occupy a privileged position in our society, living closely with their human caretakers. Sometimes, this intense relationship can be broken if behavioral problems arise, causing the relinquishment of the dog to shelters. These potentially problematic behaviors fall into five factors: disobedience, unfriendliness/aggression, nervousness, anxiety/destructiveness and excitability (Bennet et al., 2007).

The behavior of adult dogs is the result of genetic and epigenetic components. Some studies have shown the effects on the puppy's behavior of the amount of maternal care (Guardini et al., 2015; 2016; 2017) and early manipulation (Gazzano et al., 2008a) as well as the effectiveness of correct dog management advice given to the puppy's owner (Gazzano et al., 2008b).

The data of the present study confirm the results of previous researches showing a significative decrement of behavioral problems in dogs performing physical activity (Zilocchi et al., 2016), attending obedience training classes (Clark & Boyer, 1993; Jagoe & Serpell, 1996) or any form of training (Kobelt et al., 2003; Bennett et al., 2007).

The novelty of the results of this research lies in the demonstration that the performance of a daily walk with the dog of at least one hour has a positive effect on the behavior of the animal, without having to perform sports activities. In fact, dogs that have the possibility to come out for a long walk show a more controlled and polite behavior, as they are less inclined, in a statistically significant way, to pull on a leash, jump on people and chase cats.

It is therefore useful to advise the owners of particularly excitable dogs to take long walks with their animals, if they cannot carry out sporting activities with their animals. This is particularly important for elderly owners who have physical impediments that do not allow them to perform other activities with their dogs.

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Le passeggiate riducono i problemi comportamentali del cane?

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Sintesi

Al fine di chiarire gli effetti delle passeggiate sul comportamento del cane, è stato utilizzato un questionario composto di 4 sezioni. Sulla base dei 260 questionari sono stati creati due gruppi: uno costituito da 157 cani che effettuavano passeggiate giornaliere di lunghezza uguale o superiore ad un'ora (LWD) ed un altro di 103 cani che effettuavano passeggiate di durata inferiore (SWD).

I risultati ottenuti mostrano che effettuare una passeggiata giornaliera di almeno un'ora, con il cane ha un effetto positivo sul comportamento dell'animale, senza che esso debba svolgere un'attività sportiva. Infatti, i cani che hanno la possibilità di uscire per lunghe passeggiate hanno un comportamento più controllato ed educato, poiché sono meno inclini, in modo statisticamente significativo, a tirare al guinzaglio, saltare sopra le persone ed inseguire gatti.

È perciò utile consigliare ai proprietari di cani particolarmente eccitabili di effettuare lunghe passeggiate con i loro animali, qualora non sia possibile far svolgere loro un'attività sportiva. Ciò è particolarmente importante per proprietari anziani che, per impedimenti fisici, non possono svolgere altre attività con il proprio cane.