

# Sick to the stomach

One owner is relieved to find a caring solution to her vomiting dog - one that doesn't involve throwing water bombs...

It was a dark winter evening when I visited Susan McAvoy and Safi, a three-year-old spayed Jack Russell Terrier at their flat in central Glasgow, which they had shared since Safi was purchased at eight weeks old. She was a gift from Susan's son and apparently a very active puppy indeed, though pretty well behaved. Housetraining was successful, she had been taken to puppy classes, and had enjoyed two walks a day in the surrounding countryside, where there were lots of rabbit burrows for her to investigate.

I was greeted on arrival in a big way, but the euphoria was short-lived and quickly

subsided as Safi scooted back to her corner. Susan explained that Safi had behaved like this since she had first vomited behind the sofa when she was about 10 to 12 months of age. On that occasion, Susan had naturally rushed to Safi to see what was wrong and had heaped huge amounts of love and sympathy on her.

## Repeat behaviour

Each night since had been the same. Susan would feed the dog before sitting down to her own dinner, and, as soon as she sat down, Safi would rush behind the sofa and has continued to do so for the last couple of years. On each occasion, Susan, being very

concerned, would rush to deal over the mess and to soothe Safi.

After many visits to the vet over the following weeks, and a raft of tests, the vet had finally concluded that Safi's behaviour wasn't due to medical causes. So, Susan responded to the newspaper advertisement of an 'expert' dog expert to see if he could help. He duly turned up and suggested Susan punish her dog for making a mess by throwing water bombs at her. And if that didn't cure her, she should scold Safi by shouting at her and then ignoring her until the next day, or until she learned how to behave. He then took Susan's money for the 'consultation' and left.

Susan tried it once and felt terrible. When, of course, this nonsense didn't work, she confessed all to the vet, who promptly referred her to me.

I started to delve into the case in more depth. I discovered that when Safi was about a year old, Susan had suffered a minor stroke. This curtailed her activities somewhat and inevitably her dog's, too. No longer able to lead an active lifestyle, both of them were spending most of the time at home doing very little, and if Susan did go out, Safi was left at home.

Using the EMRA (emotional mood and reinforcement assessment) approach developed by COAPE, I first looked at Safi's general mood state. There was obviously a contrast in how Safi behaved before and after Susan's stroke, which appears more than coincidental. Safi's life was so full of activity and fun beforehand and I felt immediately that we needed to replace that loss as soon as possible.

## Mind games

Jack Russell Terriers are so active, tenacious and fun-loving, providing mental 'agility' is critical to their well-being and mental stability. I suggested several things, some of which kept Safi mentally active and didn't need Susan to be involved. These included using stuffed foraging toys and a dried food-dispensing toy in which most of her meals could be put and which she could play with permanently or at least twice a day. I also suggested giving Safi plenty of chewing opportunities. This would not only keep her amused, but would also make her feel a little happier, as chewing is such a rewarding activity.

We then looked at basic clicker training, which both Susan and Safi seemed to really enjoy. This was carried out mostly indoors, with training and activity directed from Susan's chair, although she was not confined to it altogether. Safi particularly liked to run, chase and discover where the treats had gone in the room when Susan threw them, and, after each 'find', she was also clicked for doing the right thing and to amplify the feeling of reward.

I then looked at Safi's emotional state at the time of the vomiting. I had a suspicion that the soothing care and attention she received would have been hugely rewarding for Safi and therefore very tempting to repeat as a means of getting that attention. Could the dog have learned this from a single event at the age of one year old? It coincided, of course, with the great reduction of attention and activity in her life that had occurred at about the same time as Susan's mini stroke. I felt that it was possible, even likely, that she had discovered an ingenious and most unusual way to get Susan's attention. Of course, this was made much easier, as Safi was being fed before Susan sat down to her evening meal. The 'gun' was being loaded!

Safi had also learned another attention-seeking behaviour, which involved regularly sitting at the back door and whining to be let out, only to ask to come straight back in again. This was also constantly being reinforced by Susan getting up regularly to let her out, because she never knew if Safi really wanted to eliminate or not and didn't want to risk having a mess to clear up in the house. So we put Safi on a fixed schedule of elimination in the garden and

added a couple of walks as and when Susan or her son could manage it.

I also advised Susan to stop all forms of punishment for vomiting or attention-seeking; not only did Safi find it confusing, it was ineffective and only served to reinforce the very behaviour she didn't want. This was because Safi was responding to both the initial soothing rewards and also the punishment as a form of attention, rewards made even greater because of the lack of other rewards in her life.

## Happy events

Finally, I suggested that Susan feed Safi after she had had her own meal, or give her a food-stuffed toy in another room, or use some of her daily ration of dried food throughout the day, which would increase Safi's number of daily 'happy events'. Rewards became more plentiful for Safi. Her previously inactive, unstimulating life was becoming more interesting as the mental stimulation increased, and she was soon learning that vomiting and barking by the door to be let out didn't bring the desired responses from Susan any more. One of the best mood-elevating days in her life came when Susan's son arrived home with a cat tunnel for Safi to play in. Now she could be a Jack Russell again!

Full marks go to Susan and her son for persisting with finding a way of treating Safi's unusual problems; full marks to the vet for doing such a huge clinical work-up and for referring the case when he could find nothing wrong; full marks to Safi for being such a responsive, lively and lovely little dog; and no marks to the sadistic, ignorant person who advised that Susan punish her little dog for her problems! ■



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Vivian is a member of The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT 0713) and The Institute of Animal Care Education (IACE).

After a lifelong association with dogs and horses, Vivian has acquired many practical skills and now spends most of her time organising activities at The Pet Behaviour Centre and Shop in Scotland with the help of a great team, who are all busily studying for the COAPE Diploma or to become CAPBT Practitioners.

Vivian is closely associated with Greyhound welfare in Scotland and is the author of *The Greyhound and Lurcher Training Guide: Getting Started*.



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