

Behavioral Tips to Implement in Your Practice that Take Less than 5 Minutes

Emily Levine, DVM, MRCVS, DACVB
Animal Emergency and Referral Associates
Fairfield, NJ

The recommendations below are not intended just for problematic pets. These are intended for well-behaved pets, puppies and kittens, so they do not develop behavior problems at the veterinary office. Remember: An Ounce Of Prevention Is Worth A Pound Of Cure.

I. Make the waiting area less stressful

A. Using mats on the weight scales

Many scales have slippery surfaces and for any pet who is anxious about getting on the scale, not having solid footing will only reinforce to the pet that the scale is scary which will only make getting a weight at the next visit, that much more challenging. There are a variety of on slip mats that can be purchased commercially for just this purpose or using mats such as yoga mats or bath mats can suffice.

B. Treats by scale or in receptionist's or technician's pocket

As long as it is not medically contraindicated, it would be great for a pet to get a treat just for entering the clinic. Treats by the scale or carried by the technicians can be used to facilitate getting the pet on the scale. How you use the treats is very important. First, ask the pet owner if the dog knows any of the following commands – sit, stay, down. If they do know these commands, the pet can be lured onto the scale, and once up there, asked for a sit/stay or down/stay and rewarded once a weight is obtained. If the pet does not know these commands well or at all, do not try and use them! Saying these words to a dog that doesn't know them will only cause the dog to be confused or anxious. If the dog doesn't know sit and or stay, it is best just to lure the dog onto the scale with treats and continue to give them quickly to keep the pet still until a weight is obtained. To minimize movement and maximize the dog keeping still, the hand giving the treats should be very close to the dog's mouth and treats should be given rapidly until the weight is obtained.

Treats can also be used to keep the dogs/cats occupied while they "wait" to enter the exam room. Having the clients ask dogs to sit, down, etc... while waiting, can keep the pet focused on the client rather than focusing on the other pets/people. For cats, clients can simply give treats in the carrier.

C Barriers to separate reactive dogs, cats from dogs, exotics from predators

Many pets are simply calmer and less stressed when there are visible barriers between animals. This is extremely helpful, and necessary, for anxious and or reactive pets.

D. Towels for cat carriers

Clients often put cat carriers on the ground and the cat that is likely already stressed is now on the floor with dogs. Keeping them higher up OR providing covers will help minimize the cats' stress. Even for clients who keep the carrier on their lap or in a chair next to them would be better off covering the crate with a towel. Towels for these purposes should be kept in the reception area.

E. Lavender scent

There is some evidence that lavender can reduce anxiety in pets. This scent can be placed on the mat on the scale, on towels used to cover cat carriers or even a little lavender scent in the waiting room area itself.

II. Making the exam room less stressful

A Toy box (or toys in a drawer/cabinet)

Keeping a toy box filled with toys in the exam room and putting out appropriate toys for the patient will allow the patient to see the exam room as a playroom. After the physical exam and vaccines the toys should be put out again as well. When appropriate, use foraging toys.

B. Kitten and puppy drawer filled different types of toys, treats, and foraging devices.

There should be a drawer filled with different kinds of treats so a variety of rewards can be offered. Each pet will have a different preference. These treats and toys can be used prior to the exam, during the exam at times, and after the exam.

C. Behavior labels in charts to note favorite treat, pet's preferred location (table, floor) etc..

Keep track of each patient's favorite treat/toy/game so when that patient returns, the staff knows what to use for rewards. The clients will no doubt be very impressed you remembered their pet's favorite treat/toy.

D. Giving treats while examining or taking blood

Between different part of the exam or at any time before, during, or after the blood-draw (this will be patient and location of venipuncture dependent), rewards should be given. The better job you are doing to help the pet associate positive feelings about veterinary visits, the better behaved that patient will be and the better the client's perception will be of patient care.

E. Pheromones

Although there is controversy to the effectiveness about pheromones, there is a biological basis for them to work. Therefore, having pheromones plugged in or sprayed on your lab coat may be helpful.

F Litter-box out in kitten/cat appointments

Having a proper sized litter box out in the exam room for new kitten/cat patients can be very helpful in preventing house soiling. This gives the practice the opportunity to show just how large a little box should be. (Safest to use an under the bed storage box with low sides and most of these are larger than a large litter box).

G. Cat shelves

Have cat shelves built into your waiting room or exam rooms to showcase to clients the different kinds of environmental enrichment they can do at home for their cats.

H. Handout on how to pill a cat;

Teaching clients how to pill a cat that doesn't involve shoving it down their throat. This handout can be given out at new cat/kitten appointment and or every time medication is dispensed.

III. Reducing stress in hospitalized patients:

A. Cats boxes

Provide boxes in the cages with cats so they can choose to hide or hang a towel on the outside of the cage such that it covers only half of the door. These strategies give the cat the opportunity to "hide" which can help decrease stress. Clearly any hospitalized patient will need to be actively checked on on a regular basis.

B. Calming music

Often times the staff likes to play music that they enjoy listening to; however certain forms of music have been shown to lower the heart rates of animals whereas other types of music increases heart the heart rate. Music that is one instrument with a very simply melody is the most calming.

C. Wash towels in lavender scent

D. Cover half the cage with a towel for anxious dogs

E. Try and decrease noise of clipboard sounds (vet wrap on the metal part).

As the staff marks off treatments on the clipboard, the clipboard can make a sharp sudden noise very close the patient. These intermittent sounds can induce stress.

F. Scents

Having the clients bring something with their scent on it and or something with the pets scent on it (a favorite toy etc...) may help.

IV. Equipment for fractious cats

Wild child squeeze chute to admin an IM sedative. Video will be shown using this in a clinical practice setting. There is no one perfect tool but there are different tools that are better suited for certain patients than others. It is up to the clinical staff to learn which tools are most appropriate for which feline patients. The Wild Child Squeeze chute is one of these tools.

V. Equipment for dogs

1. Harnesses (Easy Walk, Freedom harness, Sensible Harness)
2. Head collar (Gentle Leader, Halti, Snoot loop)
3. Basket muzzle kit
4. Counterconditioning to wearing a muzzle

VI. Things to teach a cat (* may help clients bond with their cats)

- Sit on command
- Touch it

* Low stress handling courses are highly encouraged. These courses take a significant amount of time to watch and practice, but it is an investment that will benefit your patients and staff. Sophia Yin's low stress handling course is offered online.