

vital signs

Fear and Aggression in the Veterinary Exam Room

by Valerie Barrette

So here we are ... a dog owner, a veterinary technician, and one quivering, growling mass of dog confined in a small exam room. The game plan calls for you, the vet tech, to sidle up right next to this dog (why don't they make stethoscopes just a little bit longer??) and listen to his heart rate and breathing. Then you expect this dog to willingly turn his back to you and stay still while you insert a lubricated thermometer into his rectum and take his temperature. Right. This dog was not born yesterday. He's been here before. He's *ready*.

THE OLD WAY WAS TRAUMATIC

When I started working in this field 18 years ago, I would go into the exam room, muzzle the dog, struggle with him while I got his vital signs, take the muzzle off, and then re-muzzle him when the doctor was ready. A dog who struggled was treated as if he was simply refusing to obey. We would actually command the dog to stay, not understanding that he was fighting for his safety. The veterinary visit was traumatic, especially if the dog had also waited a lengthy time in the waiting room.

THE NEW WAY IS LESS STRESSFUL

Now we know better. We know that reducing a dog's stress increases her tolerance, and we can take specific steps to make the veterinary visit less stressful for the dog:

- Set the appointment for early morning or early afternoon (before the clinic has a chance to get behind schedule).

- Work with the owner to minimize both the owner's and the dog's tension.
- Shorten the time the dog must spend in the exam room.
- Use muzzles that fit properly.
- Let the dog see his owner during the exam.

Part of (your) job entails humanely handling the dog in a manner that won't make him more fearful in the future.

TALK WITH THE OWNER/WATCH THE DOG

Spend some time talking to the owner about why the dog is at the clinic. While you are talking, quietly observe the dog from the corner of your eye. Is he sniffing in your direction? Wandering around? Does he eat the cookies you've tossed onto the floor?

The stressed dog stays in his corner, either staring directly at you or trying to hide his head. He makes no effort at all to greet you or observe the environment. As Sue Sternberg would say, he shows no overt signs of friendliness.

LEAVE YOUR EMOTIONS AT THE DOOR

If this dog is not interested in getting to know you, you are starting at ground zero. Making smoochy noises or approaching the dog and extending your hand for a sniff could very well earn you a bite. This isn't the time to try to make friends. You have a job to do, and part of that job entails humanely handling the dog in a manner that won't make him more fearful in the future. So leave your own emotions at the door.

MUZZLE THE DOG

Let the owner know that you will need to muzzle the dog for the exam. Explain that the muzzle will allow the doctor to expedite the exam and get the dog out of the clinic sooner.

Make sure your clinic or hospital carries a wide selection of muzzle sizes. A good muzzle fit can make all the difference. Unless I feel the owner is at risk, I will have the owner muzzle the dog. I estimate the size of the neck plus a little extra to make it easy for the owner to put on the muzzle. The moment I hear the click of the snap-lock, I step in, slip on the kennel lead, and tighten the muzzle. (Four Flags Over Aspen has muzzles for both short, squatty-nosed dogs and long, snippy-nosed types.)

If possible, have the same team members work with this dog during every visit. It is possible for a dog to acclimate to those team members over time. He may not like what you are doing—and you'll probably still need to muzzle him—but

