

vital signs

Fear and Aggression in the Veterinary Waiting Room

by Valerie Barrette

"One's up!" announces the receptionist over the clinic intercom, indicating that the first of your afternoon appointments has arrived. As the technician in charge of exam rooms for the day, your job is to get vital statistics (temperature, pulse, heart rate, and weight) and patient history before the doctor goes into the room.

As you enter the waiting room to get the chart, you hear an explosion of movement and sound. A large dog lunges forward while barking hysterically, backs up and fights his

leash like a bucking bronco, and finally comes to rest behind his owner, peering out at you and growling softly. Do you always have this effect on animals?

If you have worked in the veterinary field for any length of time, the above scenario is not new to you. For most dogs, the vet clinic is an environment of unwanted handling, unpleasant or uncomfortable procedures, and owner separation. With the exception of some of the extremely social breeds (who consider even a thermometer in the

rear a social event), most dogs develop an array of avoidance and escape responses when faced with a vet clinic's front door. It's a small wonder that any dog walks willingly into our little shop of horrors!

So here's the deal. Like it or not, dogs who visit the vet are going to be subjected to all the indignities a veterinary visit entails. And, like it or not, you are going to have to deal with unhappy dogs in the future. Is there a way to keep you and the rest of the staff safe, get the job done, and not make uncooperative dogs

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harder to handle next time? Let's explore that possibility by first addressing how to get the dog from the waiting room into the exam room.

AGGRESSION AS AN EMOTIONAL STATE AND A STRATEGY

Keep in mind that fear is an emotional state. Just as with humans, intense fear causes rational thought and common sense to fly out the window. Fear-based behavior can be very frustrating for owners who think that everything will be fine if their dogs will just sit and stay. When unsuccessful, owners often resort to aggression—such as jerking and punishing their dogs for making a scene—which does nothing more than elevate the fear level of already panic-stricken dogs.

Dog aggression is a strategy. Many dogs who exhibit aggression in the veterinary environment never exhibit it anywhere else. A fearful dog, on a leash and in a building, is running out of strategies.

If you feel that a dog owner needs assistance in addressing the dog's behavior, you can help him or her locate a trainer by contacting The Association of Pet Dog Trainers at 1-800-PET-DOGS or www.apdt.com.

A SECURE COLLAR

Before you bring the dog into the exam room, make sure he cannot slip out of his collar. If he tries and is successful, it will be much harder to get him forward the next time. If you must, you can give the owner a kennel lead. If possible, have the owner tighten the flat collar so that, if the dog fights, he'll be fighting with the back of his neck and not choking. Choking an already fearful dog will raise his defense response to a new level. Also, make sure the dog is not on a pinch collar. In a nice way that doesn't make the owner defensive, explain that you don't want to add pain to the picture. In a

nice way, don't give the owner a choice. That pinch collar will get you bitten.

LABELS DON'T HELP

Labels such as "unsocialized" or "dominant" are not terribly helpful. We must deal with the situation at hand. Correcting or otherwise threatening the dog will only increase his motivation to defend himself.

The first step is to stop taking the dog's behavior personally. The second step is to forget everything you ever read about alpha rolls and scruff shakes; they won't help you and will most likely get you bitten. The third step is to actively involve the dog's owner in the process. Owners of aggressive dogs tend to feel very embarrassed, believing that no one likes their dog. They bear the responsibility (not always fairly) for how their dog behaves and can't understand how their beloved pet can be so "bad." You should describe to owners the best techniques (as discussed here) to use in dealing with their dog's fear.

When dealing with aggressive dogs, never try to appear tough or dominant.

BODY LANGUAGE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Be conscious of your body posture and position as you have the owner bring the dog into the room. Don't expect the dog to be able to walk past you, and don't try to make friends. He would much rather be



ignored. If he will eat tossed treats, that's great ... but don't count on it.

Go only as far into the waiting room as needed for the owner to see you, and then turn your back as you escort the dog and owner into the exam room. Keep your body turned away or to the side as the owner brings the dog in. If needed, leave the room by way of the inner door until the dog is inside and the door is closed.

When dealing with aggressive dogs, never try to appear tough or dominant. To the fearful dog, you will be terrifying. To the offensively assertive dog, you are a challenge. Your goal should be to appear as neutral and non-threatening as possible. You can accomplish this by avoiding a direct, confrontational stare. Fast or excessively slow movements, as well as a towering, threatening demeanor, can literally make the dog's hair stand on end!

In our next column, we will discuss techniques to handle a fearful dog in a way that maintains safety, reduces stress, and does not exacerbate the dog's general fear of the situation. 🐾

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