

Enrichment: Improving the Welfare of Patients in all Services

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Enrichment involves providing environmental stimuli that will benefit the animal. Guidelines have been published so that animals housed in laboratories receive appropriate enrichment. In a private practice setting, we have the luxury of being able to ask our patients directly. Remember, enrichment is about providing preferences, thereby improving welfare.

Puppy and kitten appointments

The examination

As technicians, you have the power to make that initial visit pleasant. Do take your time collecting the history. Have a new toy available to occupy the patient as you sit and talk with the owner. Then, let the puppy or kitten come to you. You can use a toy or some treats as a lure if needed. In any case, do not grab or pursue the young patient.

During the examination, keep the patient's mind off the doctor. Soft food can be provided on a rubber toy, tongue depressor or sticky plate. Restraint should be gentle. Most puppies and kittens can be held cradled in your arms using a towel wrap for security.

Before the client leaves, be sure to discuss ways to prevent normal behaviors from becoming problems. A calm home environment is a form of enrichment. Remind owners that new pets, particularly young pets, need to be supervised or contained in a safe area at all times. Safe means that the pet cannot cause harm to itself and that the owner will not be distressed if anything in that room is chewed, scratched, or soiled on.

Review normal behavior

Owners need to provide an outlet for normal behaviors. Destructive behavior is normal exploratory behavior. Have age appropriate toys available to demonstrate.

Puppies will gnaw and cats will scratch. Too many cat owners assume that cats must be declawed lest the house be destroyed. Help owners teach their kittens which surfaces may be used for scratching. Learn the preferred position, location and substrate for scratching by setting up an assortment of suitable posts. Choose fabrics that are fun to scratch—cats do not generally appreciate the short, closely woven carpet that is so readily available on commercial posts.

Since scratch marks are used for communication, scratching posts need to be placed in socially significant areas, along the pathways that are most used for travel. Tempting and valuable furniture should be protected, for instance with double-sided sticky tape.

Another form of enrichment is reward based training. Both kittens and puppies can participate. What a great bonding experience! Be sure to remind puppy owners that confrontational training may increase the risk of future aggressive behavior. Most clients do not actually want to use a punishment based training approach and will appreciate your support.

Housetraining

When you gotta go you gotta go. Elimination is normal behavior. Create a housetraining schedule for puppies. Explain that dogs are not spiteful and that they should not be punished when owners return home to find an accident.

Crate training should be discussed at this time. Crating is not routinely safe for all dogs. It is NOT normal for a puppy to become frantic in a cage. Alert owners to signs of distress and encourage them to set up a behavior consult if distress persists. Waiting it out may not work.

Cats of all ages may be drawn to substrates other than kitty litter. Once they start shopping, they may not be so eager to return to a box at all. Comforters are clean, soft and absorbent—the perfect potty. Litter boxes should be available and appealing. Kittens need supervision. People seem to intuitively keep an eye on a young pup to prevent housesoiling. Yet they don't always think about watching their young kittens.

Finally, suggest that the puppy or kitten be examined at home on a daily basis. Up on a table for treats, and a stand for examination by the owner. Next, practice gentle restraint on the table. Ask the puppy to lie on either side, and on his back as well. This will be handy if the patient ever needs a prolonged procedure such as intradermal testing, or a sonogram.

Annual wellness examination

By now, your client can tell you a lot about what his pet prefers. Note the favorites in the chart. What treats does this patient favor? Have these available for future visits. Does this cat relax most when being brushed? Then brush her while you are collecting the history.

Of course safety is a priority, but restraint can be subtle. Have you ever noticed that even the calmest of dogs startles just a bit when you rush into a bear hug? Head halters and towel wraps are often well tolerated and can be used as a safety net. Healthy adult patients can nibble treats during their examination.

Compliance with annual visits will increase if owners do not need to worry that their pet will be unduly frightened. Dogs and cats will appreciate the perks offered at their veterinary hospital. And of course, your job will be easier if you have a cooperative patient.

Senior citizens

Seniors deserve a discussion on their own. Just because a pet is a senior does not mean he does not want to have fun. The type of fun may have to change. Dogs may need softer toys. Advise owners that cognitive function may be preserved by learning new tasks and solving problems.

Aging cats too can benefit from mental stimulation. Older cats also have special physical needs. Be sure that the owner provides easy access to favored resting places. Ramps, steps and even chairs can be used to reduce the need to jump and climb. Most important, be sure that the cat is able to get to his litter box. New boxes may need to be added. Hoods may need to be removed.

Out patient services

Like it or not, you are going to see patients that suffer from chronic or recurrent disease. Endocrine disease means many blood draws. Patients with skin disease may require multiple visits for cytology, or ear cleaning. Why not make these visits as pleasant as possible for all concerned?

For most dogs and cats, the worst part of the visit is not the needle, it is the restraint. You can do a great service by teaching patients to offer the body part in question on their own. If elephants and tigers can do it, so can dogs and cats! This will minimize the need for restraint. Most clients can practice this training at home. If not, set up a series of short visits at the clinic when no procedure will be needed.

In house patients

Cage cards and charts reflect important information about treatment and response. There are notes for body temperature, food in, and food out. Medications are noted. Warnings such as WILL BITE are posted clearly.

Mental well-being deserves consideration. Stressful animals heal more slowly, and stress increases susceptibility to disease. When safe, enrichment should be provided for hospital patients. This can be towels, cubbies, puzzle toys, and even music. Charts should reflect enrichment provided and the behavioral response.

Elective surgery

Most surgical procedures require some aftercare. That means rechecks. Ophthalmologists will reconsider removing a cataract if the patient won't allow eye examinations without general anesthesia. Uncooperative patients receive less than adequate care.

Most of these challenging patients are fearful. They will benefit from a series of regular sessions to help them relax on the table. Systematic desensitization and counterconditioning can be slow but the time is well-spent. If owners object to paying for this service, just compare the fee for 10 short technician appointments to the fee involved if a surgical procedure must be repeated. And consider the additional pain for the patient. Don't be shy about offering this invaluable service. Patience brings patients.

Post op

It is standard fare to send patients home with a list of restrictions. Dental procedure? Don't chew anything hard. Orthopedic procedure? No rough play, minimal walking, hours of confinement to a crate.

Yet we often neglect to offer replacement activities. The active dog who loves to chase a ball and follow his owner around the house now can do nothing but sit or lie down and wait for someone to give him a little pat. When attention is offered, it may be to administer medication, or an uncomfortable stretch.

Post surgical discharge instructions should include not only a list of restrictions but also a list of can do's. Here are some examples:

- Nose work—sniffing games to replace the interesting scents normally encountered on walks
- Identification training—teach the dog to indicate named items by using a body part that is not restricted (bark, nudge with nose, pat with paw, or sit)
- Clicker training—many skills require minimal movement; cats and dogs can participate
- Puzzle toys—dogs and cats can problem solve using their nose or a front paw, whichever is available
- Videos—many pets appear to enjoy watching activity on the big screen or ipad
- Brushing—cats and dogs that enjoy brushing can have this pleasure daily

These activities not only improve the welfare of the patients, they help maintain a positive relationship with the client.

Summary

We get busy. We concentrate on meeting all the medical needs of our patients. Behavioral needs are important too. Sometimes they take a little extra time. Pets are someone's family members—they deserve that time.