

VTNE Top Topics: Small animal nursing overview part 1: Behavior



Understanding dog and cat behavior can help prevent bite injuries

🐾 Understand cat and dog behavior to optimize your success in the small animal clinic.

🐾 Body language is the way dogs and cats communicate with us.

Small animal behavior

- Unwanted behaviors are a major cause of pet relinquishment
- In the clinic:
 - Perceived stress of visit may prevent owners from seeking care
 - Understand behaviors to diminish patient fear and stress, improve safety, and ease client concerns
 - Body language is the best way to assess pet behavior: It's their way of talking



Treats are an excellent way to decrease stress and build trust with your patient

Fear Free™ practice

- Goal: Reduce patient stress and anxiety in the clinic
- Fear Anxiety and Stress (FAS) score: Objective measure of stress level
- Balance Dx/Tx needs against FAS
- FAS:
 - See ↑ aggression
 - Prevents necessary Dx/Tx

- Causes ↑ HR, RR, body temp, blood pressure, blood glucose; alters CBC parameters
- Can delay healing (cortisol)
- Treats help ↓ FAS and build trust
- Continuous contact w/ pet can ↓ FAS w/ handling
- Examine most sensitive areas last:
 - Head/face
 - Paws
 - Deep palpation of abdomen
- Document response in medical record for future visits

Canine behavior

- Unwanted behaviors are a major cause of pet relinquishment
- Appropriate puppy socialization can help prevent behavior problems in later life
- Puppy socialization period is @ 3 - 16 w
 - Brain is most elastic and receptive to learning about:
 - Social partners and interactions
 - Threat response
 - Appropriate response to environment
 - Poor socialization can ↑ risk of unwanted fear-based behaviors
 - Interpret body language to help prevent bite injuries and improve patient compliance
- What are signs of FAS?
 - Pupils dilated in normal light
 - Tail tense, tucked between legs
 - Panting, lip licking, yawning
 - Holding ears back or down
 - Soliciting attention from owner/vet personnel
 - Fixed gaze away from or towards threat: Moderate to severe FAS
- What are signs of severe FAS?
 - Defensive aggression
 - Stiff/frozen
 - Lunging, growling, snapping, biting
 - Threatening posture
 - Hiding
 - Avoidance
 - If a dog shows these signs you need immediate help
 - Stop intervention/handling
 - Speak to DVM about medications/next steps
 - High risk of bite incident



Puppy socialization is essential for normal development



Failure to identify FAS and intervene can result in injury to the patient and personnel

Unwanted canine behaviors

- Unwanted elimination
 - Housetraining
 - Have DVM evaluate any previously house-trained dog w/ onset of inappropriate elimination
 - May indicate underlying health problem

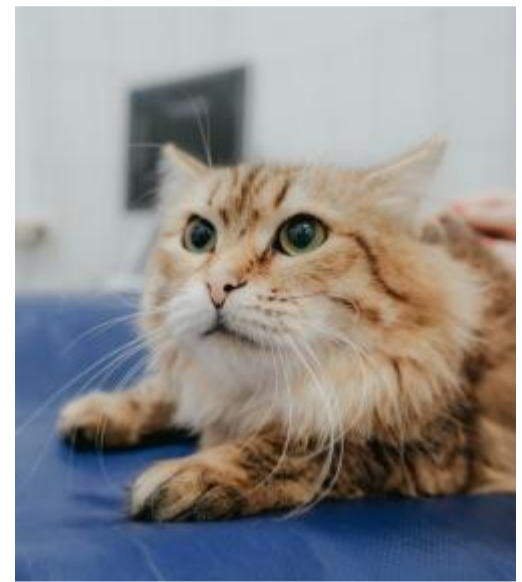
- Destructive behavior: Chewing, digging/scratching
 - Introduce acceptable items for chewing - e.g., toys
 - May indicate separation anxiety or other fear-based behavior
- Aggression
 - When it is occurring?
 - Fear-induced
 - Play-related
 - Redirected
- Decrease fear-based aggression in clinic w/ positive reinforcement
 - Reward w/ treats after each step of exam/procedure
- Understand body language and stop when pet exhibits FAS



Recommend appropriate chew toys to help prevent destructive chewing behavior at home

Feline behavior

- In cats, inappropriate elimination is the most common undesirable behavior
- Patient compliance does not always indicate a relaxed state; cats with high stress may freeze
- Kitten socialization period is @ 2 - 7 wks
- Normal cat behavior: Tail up, +/- slight curl at tip, ears erect and forward, exploring environment, interacting w/ vet personnel
- Signs of FAS:
 - Refusal to get out of carrier
 - Tail down and tight to body
 - Dilated pupils
 - Ears to side or slightly back
 - Tail tip twitching
- What are signs of severe FAS?
 - Learned helplessness
 - Freezing, hiding, escaping
 - Hunched posture
 - Defensive aggression
 - Hissing/growling, vocalization
 - Showing teeth
 - Striking w/ front paws
 - Biting



Cat showing moderate FAS, note the dilated pupils and ears positioned to the sides of the head

Feline behavior in the clinic

- Behavioral modification begins at home
 - Acclimate cat to carrier several wks before appt
- Create cat-specific waiting/exam/treatment areas
- Use appropriate restraint methods ([see part 2](#))
 - Useful info at [American Association of Feline Practitioners Cat Friendly Practices®](#)
 - In some cases consider sending the patient home for administration of sedatives such as gabapentin prior to a rescheduled visit

Unwanted feline behaviors

- Indoor cats have unique behavioral needs
 - Unwanted behaviors can result if not met
- Unwanted elimination
 - Most common undesirable behavior
 - DVM assessment if a change in habits
 - Evaluate for underlying health problem
 - Cats have litter type/box preferences
- Destructive behavior
 - Scratching



Redirect unwanted scratching behavior to scratching posts and other purpose-designed surfaces

Images courtesy of: [Graeme Main](#), [Ayla Verschueren](#), [Ayla Verschueren](#), [Ellen Levy Finch](#), [Sendai Blog](#), [Anya Prygunova](#), [frankieleon](#), [Willian Justen de Vasconcellos](#).

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