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For Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Our Piece: Acclimating Your Pet to the Veterinary Hospital

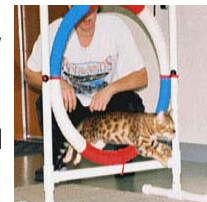


Dear Suzanne,

Hope all of you are having a good summer. As you'll see, our new puppy Coral has kept us busy, but we love her to pieces. Read on for more about her, and our cat agility adventures this month!

• **Cat Piece: Cat Agility Trials**

We attended our first cat show and cat agility trial this weekend. What an experience! The agility course we observed had 2 tunnels, a cat-size version of an A-frame (cat walk), weave poles, a horizontal "ladder" (ladder walk), and 2 hoops. Trained, competitive cats can complete the course in under 30 seconds. Most of the cats we observed were experiencing the course for the first time. The owners were using various sorts of toys to lure their cats through the course. In a timed trial, they had 3 minutes to do so.



The course was set up for novice cats. For advanced cats, as seen in the photo (from www.catagility.com) the hoops could be raised, and also be separated, requiring the cats to jump through 4 rather than 2. Also, the two pieces of each platform could be separated by as much as 6 feet, requiring the cats to jump this distance.

For many of our pets (and us!), going to the veterinarian is a stressful event. The hospital can be a scary place. It has unusual smells and noises and there may be unfriendly dogs or cats in the waiting area. Things that happen there can be frightening for pets, such as being handled and manipulated by unfamiliar people, having various instruments inserted in body openings, and being given injections.

If we do nothing, and simply let our pets have unpleasant experiences, chances are that our pets will become frightened and possibly even aggressive when they go to the veterinary hospital. It doesn't have to be that way. By working with your veterinary staff you can make visits pleasant and even down right fun! This is an important topic for us, because we want Coral's veterinary visits to be something she enjoys.

It is much easier to acclimate your pet to the veterinary hospital if the pleasant visits start when your pet is young. This allows you to take advantage of the sensitive period most mammals and birds have during their first few months of life for accepting new people, places and things. Sensitive periods are times when it is easiest for an animal to learn about his social relationships or his physical environment.

Even if you can't start when your pet is young (say you've adopted an adult from a shelter), you can still help your pet learn to like veterinary visits, but it may take more time and effort to help her change. She may have already have had bad experiences that have to be overcome.

Talk to your veterinary staff about "drop in" visits that don't involve a real examination or treatment. Just bring your pet into the hospital to visit with the staff and to become familiar with the place. Bring along your pet's favorite treat or toy that you can give to your pet before and during the visit.

Although the cats we observed were inexperienced in agility, they all seemed to share several characteristics. They were extremely playful cats at home, they were well socialized and not afraid of new environments, and they showed a natural curiosity about their world.

When first put onto the course, the cats seemed to require several minutes to feel comfortable there. They would sniff and look around before being able to show any interest in their toys. The owners often switched from one toy to another to keep their cats interested. It was surprising how many of the cats could be lured through the course successfully.

The cats seemed to have the most difficulty jumping up on the catwalk and the platform rather than going under them. This makes sense, because of cats' tendency to want to hide or get under things when frightened. Probably for a similar reason, some cats would enter the tunnels, but would not want to come out. And just as beginning dogs can do with jumps, their tendency was to go around the hoops rather than through them.

If you'd like to start training your cat, try [Clicker Training For Cats by Karen Pryor](#) or [Cat Training in 10 Minutes by Miriam Fields-Babineau](#). Cat agility equipment is also available from the [ICAT website](#).

We also believe some of the agility equipment could be used for cat enrichment in shelters that have cat rooms for communal housing. Not only would the equipment give the cats something to climb on and play with, but many of the pieces would effectively create hiding places, add vertical space and allow the cats to increase their social distance from one another when needed.

Veterinary clinics that are cat-only or are interested in attracting new cat owners, could benefit by using some of the equipment for kitten socialization sessions. Cats cannot compete in cat agility until they are 8 months old, but several of the participants we spoke with thought a kitten agility course would be a great idea.

Start with very short (five minutes or less) and simple visits, just into the waiting area to sit and receive treats, pleasant words and a pet from other clients or veterinary staff.

Gradually make the visits more like a real examination with weighing on the scale, a trip into the exam room and even gentle handling by the staff.

Watch your pet's reaction. If she becomes fearful or agitated, stop and let her calm down before you proceed.

Don't force her to experience the hospital. It can make the experience worse.

Most veterinary hospitals will be glad to work with you to help your pet be less fearful and more relaxed. It makes their jobs easier and more rewarding when their patients are calm, relaxed and friendly. Be sure to arrange these visits ahead of time so that you and your pet can visit at times when things aren't so busy and your pet can have the best experience.

Some veterinary hospitals are now offering puppy classes, kitten classes or puppy or kitten parties at the hospital that help to acclimate young dogs and cats to the hospital. These can be very efficient ways to acclimate your pet as well as socialize her to other animals and people. In these classes you will also learn valuable information about how to better care for your pet.

Investing the extra time it takes to help your pet enjoy her veterinary visits will be worth it in the long run. Your pet can receive better medical care, and you, your pet, and your veterinary staff will be less stressed.

For more information about helping your puppy (or dog) tolerate grooming, handling, and nail trims, look for our upcoming **The Pet Parents' Guide to A Behaviorally Healthy Puppy**. This used to be our **Puppy Behavior Wellness Manual**, but we are expanding, revising and updating it

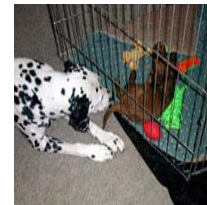
All of you expert dog trainers out there can broaden your skills by starting in cat agility. If you are a dyed-in-the-wool "dog-person" and need an introduction to cat behavior, be sure and attend our lecture - Cat Behavior 101 for Dog Trainers at this year's [Association of Pet Dog Trainers](#) annual conference in Denver in September. More on that next month.

Or you may find our two new CD's on cat behavior - **What Cats Want: Creating a Cat Friendly Environment** and **Helping Cats Co- Exist: Creating Feline Friendships** of help to you. Look for these on our website in the next month.

[Learn more about cat behavior from our telecourses](#)

• **Dog Piece: Introducing Coral to Ashley**

In last month's issue, we introduced you to Coral, our now 11 week old female Irish setter puppy. We acquired Coral in July, when she was 7 weeks old. Coral was tiny, the smallest of her litter, and weighed about 4 pounds when she came to us. Because of her red color, small size, and erratic movements, she somewhat resembled a squirrel. It seemed as though Ashley, our 7 year old Dalmatian, certainly thought so. For their first encounter, we placed Coral safely in an exercise pen, and allowed Ashley to approach and sniff her. Scaring us all, Ashley jumped and pushed at the pen, growled and barked, trying to get to Coral.



Although our first, emotional reaction was to grab Ashley and start yelling, we restrained ourselves. Instead, Suzanne called Ashley a few feet away from the pen, sat down on the grass, and told Ashley to lie down next to her. Ashley complied, and as Suzanne stroked her and rubbed her ears, she slowly relaxed (both Suzanne and Ashley!) We then moved Ashley closer to the pen. We gave Ashley a few tidbits and continued to stroke her, while talking softly, keeping her relaxed as possible.

When we got close to the pen again, Ashley was still intensely interested in sniffing Coral

into a new book.

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but didn't do any more lunging. Ashley spent the next 3 days laying outside the pen, both inside the house and out, watching and sniffing Coral. She was intent on Coral's every movement, and her sniffing was so intense she'd drool. We continued to do the massage sessions near the pen as well.

After 4 or 5 days, as Ashley became more relaxed and less focused while watching Coral, we allowed the two closely supervised contact with each other. Coral showed typical puppy play and greeting behaviors toward Ashley - pawing at her face and nipping her feet. It was then that Ashley seemed to finally figure out that Coral was a dog, not a prey animal.

Now, almost a month later, Coral and Ashley are great playmates. Ashley has learned to be incredibly gentle with Coral most of the time - even rolling on her back and allowing Coral to crawl all over her. But we still watch them closely, because it would be just too easy for 55 pound Ashley to inadvertently hurt 7 pound Coral.

The take-home message from this example is that introducing new dogs or puppies to resident dogs requires constant supervision and baby steps. Some introductions may go smoother than Coral's and Ashley's, while others may be much more difficult. But the major goal is to help both dogs establish friendly patterns of interactions with one another.

Puppies are most likely to be friendly, or perhaps fearful or submissive, but the reactions of adult dogs can vary from friendly to threatening or aggressive. Like Ashley, adult dogs need acclimation time - opportunities to smell and watch the puppy without direct contact. Ashley learned to be calm while watching Coral bounce around her pen.

Most adult dogs will find the need to set limits with puppies, using normal threatening behavior. This could include a growl, baring of teeth or an air snap. These interactions need to be closely monitored to be sure the puppy responds appropriately by backing off, and the adult dog does not escalate its behavior beyond acceptable limits.

We've found that too often people tend to rush introductions and assume that things will be OK before they really know whether this is true. Puppies can become fearful and learn bad social habits, and adult dogs can learn to dislike and bully puppies when encounters between the two are not well managed. We see so many problems between pairs of female dogs in families that we are taking extra care to make sure that Coral and Ashley get their lifelong relationship off to a good start. More about Coral and Ashley's developing relationship, and more introduction tips in future articles.

Look for the expanded version of our [Puppy Behavior Wellness Manual](#) - The Pet Parents' Guide to a Behaviorally Healthy Puppy coming soon.

- **What's New at ABA**

Behavior Wellness Article Appears in JAVMA After almost a year of writing and revision, we finally are thrilled to see our article "**Behavior Wellness Concepts for General Veterinary Practice**" appear in the August 15 edition of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

This grew out of a workshop that co-author Dr. Marsha Heinke did with Suzanne for the American Animal Hospital Association several years ago. You've seen the behavior wellness approach we take throughout our materials and on our website.

We'll be speaking on the topic both at the [APDT](#) meeting in September in Denver and in **Australia** at the [APDT conference](#) there in October.

New Telecourse Schedule to Be Posted Soon The fall schedule for our telecourses will be on our website by the first of next week. From our home page, navigate to either [Services for Pet Owners](#) or [Services for Professionals](#), and then to Telecourses

- **Announcement for Local Colorado Subscribers**

Karen Saunders a fellow member of CIPA ([Colorado Association of Independent Publishers](#)) has organized a potluck to benefit [CCI \(Canine Companions for Independence\)](#)

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for Saturday, August 21.

[More information on the CCI Potluck](#)