

Reducing Stress in Pets at the Grooming or Veterinary Clinic

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A trip to the boarding kennel, groomer or even veterinarian can be a stressful event for many pets. Inevitably, there is always a degree of unpleasantness for the pet associated with these visits, as the end result are baths, vaccinations, being separated from their families or other procedures pets would rather avoid.

Owners, as well as the staff at these facilities, must take extra care to minimize the stress put upon pets during these visits, and do everything possible to counteract the unavoidable 'bad things' pets come to expect from these trips. One important step is to make your pet's arrival at these facilities immediately produce something he enjoys.

As you walk in the door, talk to your pet in a happy tone of voice that communicates this is going to be a fun experience, and avoid anxiety ridden 'poor baby' voice tones. Use the word that signals to your pet he is going to get a treat (cookie, biscuit, etc.) and give some to staff to offer to him. This may be more difficult with cats, but a little bit of canned tuna dropped through the door of a carrier often works wonders.

How the staff approaches him is also crucial. It is much better to allow and encourage the dog to approach the staff, rather than the staff approaching him. Instruct people to stand still as you walk toward them. They should turn the side of their bodies toward your dog (don't face him), either stand up straight or bend at the knees (rather than looming over your pet by bending at the waist), look down at the floor or off to the side to avoid making eye contact with your dog, and keep their hands, which hold tidbits, at their sides.

As your dog approaches the person, he will likely sniff the hand, and the staff member can then present a palm holding the treat to your dog. As your dog takes the treat, the person can gently scratch him under the chin, rather than reaching over his head, which most dogs find threatening.

If you bring your cat in a carrier, make sure any wire or see through parts are covered to prevent your cat by being frightened by the sight of unfamiliar things. It probably helps for such facilities to have separate entrances for dogs and cats, but if this isn't possible, ask if you can immediately take your cat to an examination room, or put him in his own cage. Otherwise, consider leaving him in your car (weather permitting), until staff is ready to take him.

Perhaps the most helpful things you can do are frequent socialization visits. Take your pet to the groomer, kennel or veterinarian so that he can get to know the staff, and become familiar with the facility without being left there or anything unpleasant done. Staff can greet him as described above, give him special treats, or play with him briefly and then you return home.

These visits help to compensate for your pet's prediction that these places always mean 'bad things'. Staff should be happy to accommodate you as it makes your pet easier for them to handle and care for.

These and other techniques were the subjects of lectures we recently gave in Hershey Pennsylvania at Groom Expo in 2002, a conference for groomers, kennel operators, pet sitters and other animal care professionals.

**Edited version first published in the Rocky Mountain News, Denver, CO.
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