

# Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors

Promoting the Best in Pet Behaviour



## **APBC Veterinary Newsletter April 2019**

Welcome to our next newsletter, highlighting aspects of behaviour that are particularly relevant to those working in veterinary practice.

### **Making surgery visits less stressful for cats and their owners.**

Many cats and their owners find visits to the veterinary surgery very stressful, and this can result in owners avoiding bringing their cat to the surgery unless they are very unwell. The problems often start with owners struggling to get their cat into a carrier. Helping owners to choose an appropriate carrier and then accustom their cat to going into it should make visits to the surgery, and other places like the cattery, much less stressful. This will benefit not only the cat and their owner, but also anyone who will be handling and interacting with the cat in the surgery. There also other things we can do in the surgery to help make vet visits less stressful for cat.

### **Advice on choosing a carrier.**

There is a huge range of cat carriers available, and owners will benefit from advice regarding the best sort to buy. The best carriers are those that can be separated into two parts (the top half lifts off from the bottom part). Carriers that have a top opening as well as a front opening are much easier to get cats into and out of than those with just one door at the front. There are also other advantages to this design, especially when it comes to examining nervous cats in the surgery (see below).



The carrier also needs to be large enough for the cat to get into, turn around and lie down in comfortably. Carriers that have been bought for small kittens may need to be replaced with a larger one once the kitten is fully grown.

### **Accustoming the cat to going into a carrier**

Owners will also benefit from advice on how to teach their cat to be comfortable going into their carrier. For kittens with no previous experience of a carrier this is usually fairly straightforward. However for cats that already have negative associations with being in a carrier this will need to be done more carefully. Owners will need advice on:

- Preparing the carrier: it will need thorough cleaning with a biological agent to remove any traces of alarm pheromones if the carrier has been used for vet visits previously.
- Introducing the carrier: place it in an area that the cat spends plenty of time in, and leave it there permanently, so it becomes “part of the

furniture”. Using food and/or toys to encourage the cat or kitten to explore and enter the carrier initially.

- Gradually accustoming the cat or kitten to being shut in the carrier for short periods of time, and then to being lifted up and moved around inside the carrier.

There is an owner hand-out outlining how to accustom a cat to a cat carrier on the APBC website: <https://www.apbc.org.uk/pet-owner-article/accustoming-a-cat-kitten-to-a-carrier/>

You are very welcome to direct your clients to this, or to print it out to give to your clients.

### **Accustoming cats to car travel**

Getting the cat used to being in the carrier is an important part of reducing stress associated with surgery visits. However many cats also find car travel scary. It is easier to teach kittens to be comfortable travelling in the car than to do this with cats that are already scared due to previous negative experiences. Once their kitten or cat is used to going into the carrier, owners should be advised to take them on very short car journeys to start with. The carrier needs to be firmly secured in the car, either wedged into position or secured with a seat-belt so it cannot slide or tip over if the car moves or stops suddenly, although ideally the driver needs to avoid sudden braking or turns. Each journey should be preceded and followed by something the cat particularly likes, such as some tasty treats or a game with a favourite toy, to try and create a positive association with car travel. If a cat or kitten is comfortable with both being in the carrier and travelling in the car, they will be much less stressed when they arrive at the surgery.

### **Reducing stress in the Waiting Room**

Another common source of stress for cats is the waiting room, where they will be surrounded by unfamiliar people and other animals and exposed to potentially scary sounds and smells. Ideally your practice will have a separate waiting area for cats, so they do not have to encounter unfamiliar dogs in particular.

Cats tend to feel safer in raised places, and some practices have installed shelf units to put cat baskets onto. If your practice does not have special shelves, reception staff should ask cat owners to put cat baskets up on chairs rather than on the floor. It can also help to cover the cat basket in a towel to prevent cats seeing other people and cats etc. Owners should be advised to bring a towel from home so it smells familiar to the cat. However the practice can also keep a stack of clean towels ready to give to owners who have not brought their own. Ideally waiting times should be kept as short as possible to minimise stress for the cat.



A picture from an ISFM cat friendly clinic

### **Reducing stress during veterinary examinations.**

It can sometimes be very difficult to persuade a nervous cat to leave their basket in the consulting room. Using force will be extremely distressing for the cat and may make examination much more difficult. One great advantage of baskets that come in half is that the top can be removed and the cat allowed to

stay in the bottom part of the carrier for the examination. Many cats will be much happier to be examined if they can stay in their basket, and it is possible to do many procedures like this including blood pressure checks and even venepuncture.

Where a carrier does not come in half it is important to wait for the cat to feel comfortable enough to come out in their own time. If they are still reluctant to leave the carrier they might be persuaded with a fishing rod toy or a trail of tasty treats. However it is still important to give them a little time to explore the room before attempting to examine them.

Minimal or no restraint should be used during the examination: firm restraint is likely to make cats more worried and harder to examine in future. If it is not possible to examine a cat or to perform a particular procedure without restraint, consider rescheduling the consultation, and using medication as outlined below. Try and save the most aversive procedure for last, for example the vaccination injection, and then allow the cat to go back to their basket immediately.



### **Extra help for very fearful cats**

Unfortunately there will be some cats that find surgery visits extremely frightening, either because they are nervous generally or because they have had bad experiences associated with surgery visits in the past. These cats may benefit from short-acting fear and anxiety-reducing medication before surgery visits. There are no licensed options for this but options include:

- **Gabapentin:** 50-100mg/cat (Van Haaften et al, 2017)
- **Trazodone:** 25-50 mg/cat (Stevens et al, 2016)

These should be given about 2 hours before the cat is due to be put into the carrier to come to the surgery. Another potential option could be **Sileo**, given about an hour before the cat is due to be put into the carrier (Landsberg et al, 2018). The dose of dexmedetomidine used in this study was 0.0225 mg (1 dot).

### **Reducing stress for cats in the hospital.**

Most cats tend to find being out of their own environment very unsettling, and this means that hospital stays can be extremely stressful for them.

There are a few things we can do to minimise stress. Having separate wards for cats and for dogs can make a big difference to how stressed cats will be in the hospital. If this is not possible, cats will feel safer in cages that are higher up, and preferably not facing other cats or dogs. We can also help to reduce stress by giving cats the ability



to hide and ensuring they have some familiar - smelling items in their cage. One way of doing this if space allows would be to put their own carrier in the cage, with their own bed inside. If this is not possible other options to allow hiding could include putting boxes or containers inside the cage for the cat to rest inside or on top and/or a towel draped across the front of the cage. It is also important to try and minimise exposure to other stressors including noise, strong smells and bright lights in the hospital area. Resources such as food, water and the litter tray should be spaced as far apart as the space allows.

### **References and Resources**

**ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic:** <https://catfriendlyclinic.org/vets-nurses/>  
**Landsberg et al (2018)** Anxiolytic effects of dexmedetomidine oromucosal gel (Sileo) and gabapentin in feline travel anxiety model. In Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the European Congress of Behavioural Medicine and Animal

Welfare (ECVBMAW). Berlin 7-29 September 2018. pp 127-128

**Stevens et al (2016)** Efficacy of a single dose of trazodone hydrochloride given to cats prior to veterinary visits to reduce signs of transport- and examination-related anxiety. JAVMA, 249(2), 202-207.

**Van Haften et al (2017)** Effects of a single pre-appointment dose of gabapentin on signs of stress in cats during transportation and veterinary examination. JAVMA, 251(10), 1175-1181

### **Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS) Screening Service.**

It is commonly recognised that BOAS can seriously impact the welfare of affected dogs, but its effects on behaviour may be less well recognised. Exercise intolerance may be misinterpreted by owners as their dog being “stubborn” and not wanting to go for walks or do other behaviours rather than physically being unable to do these behaviours. Dogs with airway obstruction may also be stressed generally and can easily become over-heated. Both of these can cause the dog to become irritable and less tolerant of interactions with people and other dogs.

As reported recently in the Vet Record, the University of Cambridge and the Kennel Club have together launched a health screening process for BOAS in Pugs, French Bulldogs and Bulldogs.

<https://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/184/6/171.1> It is important that owners of brachycephalic breeds are aware of how BOAS might affect their dog’s behaviour. Knowing how severely their dog is affected will help them to predict how severely BOAS is likely to impact on their behaviour and welfare generally. It is also important to try and ensure potential owners of brachycephalic breeds are aware of these potential effects before taking on a puppy or older dog.

### **Debunking the Dominance Myth**

Although dominance as an explanation of the relationship between dogs and people has been completely debunked by the scientific community, many owners continue to believe that their dogs are behaving in undesirable ways, and particularly showing aggression, because they are being dominant. This view is unfortunately encouraged by certain TV programmes featuring dog behaviour, and unsurprisingly many owners will believe what they see on TV is true. The APBC has produced a hand-out for owners explaining why Dominance is not a good explanation for the relationship between dogs and their owners, and for why dogs show problem behaviours. Instead it outlines how relationships can be built with compassion, kindness and trust, and how problem behaviours can be addressed effectively without the use of force or aggression. To read the full article please go to: <https://www.apbc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Your-dogs-being-dominant.pdf>