

Animal Husbandry at Home

At the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago there is a diabetic Orangutan who gives blood samples and takes insulin injections every day. While it is not a new phenomenon for zoo animals to be poked and prodded by veterinarians, this Orangutan is remarkable for two reasons - he participates in these medical procedures voluntarily and he was taught to do so.

A major problem for veterinarians, groomers and pet owners is getting animals to passively accept necessary pain and discomfort. Many animals are systematically taught to hate veterinarians because the only time they experience physical discomfort is when they are in the clinic. Matted little Lhasa Apso's tend to bite the hands that groom them because they object to having their hair pulled for long periods of time. Many pet owners are bitten while attempting to trim their pet's nails as a result of poor handling technique.

Over the years, methods of physically restraining animals have become safer for the handlers and diabolical for the animals. Fractious horses are usually restrained with a device called a "twitch". This gizmo looks like a pair of crab cracking pliers, which are closed down on the horse's upper lip. Needless to say, if your upper lip is in this type of hand-held vise, you are going to stand very still while you are being poked, prodded or vaccinated. Dogs are often prevented from biting with leather or nylon fabric muzzles, while cats may be placed in canvas bags that expose only the part of the animal to be examined.

In contrast to the traditional forms of restraint, marine mammal trainers have long taught "husbandry" behaviors to their animals to facilitate medical exams and treatment. Dolphins, whales, otters and sea lions are routinely taught to slip out of the water and give urine samples on command, give blood samples and accept injections.

For the pet owner, teaching husbandry behaviors can help a pet become accustomed to necessary handling. Teaching a dog or cat to stand quietly while being examined or to lie while having his nails trimmed is not a difficult task. The benefit to the animal is obvious. If you would like to teach your pet these types of behaviors, here are some simple suggestions to get started.

- Occasionally board your pet at a veterinary clinic when they are healthy, to get them used to the sights, sounds and smell of a clinic. If the only time they go there is when they are treated, staying overnight can become traumatic in itself.
- Handle your pet's feet on a regular basis. Gently and firmly hold the animal's paw for one or two seconds. Give a treat or affection for passive behavior. At first, limit the handling to brief moments of success and gradually extend the length of time you can manipulate the paw. If you are going to use clippers to trim the pet's nails, start by merely touching the trimmers to the nail and giving the animal a treat. Then squeeze the trimmer gently around the nail and release the pressure. Do not actually trim the nail until after the pet is completely comfortable with this process. If you aren't sure how to trim the nail, ask your veterinarian to demonstrate the correct technique.
- To teach your pet to be groomed, grip the animal's hair in your fingers and pull gently. Give treats and affection periodically if the animal remains quiet. Do not expect

the pet to remain for long periods of time on the first few sessions. Gradually build the amount of time you can tug the pet's hair before you switch to a real brush or comb.

- Teaching a puppy or kitten to accept handling is far easier than teaching an adult. Try to start the training as soon as the animal is old enough to come to your home. Plan for those experiences that you know will be important to an adult animal and start planning early.

To teach Fido to accept injections, pinch the skin lightly at the base of the animal's neck and give a treat. Gradually increase the pressure a little until the feeling of getting pinched is strongly associated with the treat that follows.

Ask your vet or groomer if you can come to their business and sit in the waiting room at times other than when actual treatment or grooming is to take place. If Fido goes to the doctor many times but only gets shots once in awhile he is more likely to enjoy trips to the vet.

Handle your pet's mouth often. Lift the lips and look at the teeth and gums. Get the animal used to having human fingers touching teeth, tongue and gums on a regular basis.

Watch a veterinary exam and notice how the veterinarian feels a pet's abdomen, paws and head. Flex your pet's limbs to move them through their natural range of movement. Try to recreate these manipulations at home where the pet is more comfortable.