

Preparing For Veterinary Procedures

As I've mentioned in earlier post, I lost my assistance dog to lung cancer 3 weeks ago, and the experience(s) that I had during the week of testing and procedures preceding his death, have led me to think quite a bit on the topic of how we can (a) prepare our dogs to deal with veterinary procedures/exams with less stress and (b) what ways we can work with veterinary professionals to identify more effective ways to create a calm, and yet safely controlled, environment for exams and treatments.

I've already posted a similar post on the OC-Assist list, given the significance this topic has for assistance dog teams -- but I thought it might be worthwhile bringing up the general topic in larger clicker forums. (For those that have seen this post on other lists, my apologies for repeating myself).

In response to my original query on the OC-Assist list, Sue Ailsby came up with a list of behaviors that she believes in building in her dogs. I've taken the liberty of recapping them (with some editing for brevity's sake):

Sue's list of behaviors included:

1. Crate training
2. Table training
3. Being manhandled (...not just that I can touch the dog's paws or her muzzle or her tail, but that I can completely manipulate them. I can open the mouth, hold it open, play with the teeth. I can spread the paws, jerk the toenails around, brush them, paint the toenails. I can raise the tail, lower it, pull it off to the side, put in a thermometer, express the anal glands. I can look in the ears, stick my fingers in the ears, clean the ears, pour stuff in the ears, massage the ears. In short, I can pretty much do what I want with the dog.
4. (Place dogs in...) strange positions - specifically, I teach my dogs to be right upside down on their backs, and relaxed, and lying on either side and relaxed.
5. Going off with other people.
6. Eating and drinking from strange dishes - part of being comfortable with other people, and crate training.

(Sue has additional comments in her original post, that are well worth rereading, but I'm wanted to highlight these categories of behaviors).

One thing I would add to Sue's suggestions (or possibly clarify) is that all of the "manhandling" behaviors outlined in *3* -- would IMO -- also include being generalized to having someone else (an experienced person -- groomer, vet tech, veterinarian) performing the same. I mention this from my recent experience with Trav -- where we found he was conditioned as long as *I* was controlling the manipulation...or nearby...but became more distraught when I wasn't present (and of course, people were more aggressive in their handling).

What I am continue to think about -- and would like to hear from others -- is how listmembers are approaching training these general behaviors that Sue has outlined. I'm also wondering, particularly for those teaching/training, if anyone has given thought to, or made use of, adaptive targets or related items, to help their dogs either in training, or in generalization of these behaviors.

For example, the simple use of a unique portable target that is familiar to dog, as a tool to help the dog orient to a particular position/placement when in a veterinary exam or procedure.

Or, the use a particular blanket/mat (conceptually a target) that the dog is familiar with as a *safe* place to lie down on for extended periods. Something that could be included in crate -- or potentially on exam tables -- or other areas.

I'm sure there are other ideas percolating out there on this topic -- and while I know that this is of more pressing importance to me given my recent experience with Trav -- I do feel strongly, this is an area that not only assistance dog teams can benefit from -- but that perhaps identifying clicker training methods and tools, can help improve relationships for all involved when going through veterinary procedures.

Kathleen Kisselburgh

kgsanborn@hotmail.com

copyright 2001 Kathleen Kisselburgh