Behavior problems put animals at risk, either directly or indirectly. Animals that are overtly aggressive or highly destructive (like some with severe separation anxiety) may be euthanized or surrendered to an animal shelter on an emergency basis as a result of their undesirable behavior. Or, they may injure themselves during aggressive or anxious episodes. More commonly, undesirable behaviors have more insidious effects on animal health by causing a poor human-animal relationship. For instance, a pet’s unruly behavior and an owner’s poor understanding of why these behaviors occur can cause the owner to interact less with the pet, so that the pet has little quality human interaction. In addition, a poor relationship can cause the owner to devalue the pet and, as a result, become less willing to provide veterinary care for the pet, less willing to keep the pet under inconvenient circumstances (e.g., when moving), and more likely to relinquish the pet to a shelter or to euthanize the pet for any reason.

Aggression toward People
Aggression toward people is one of the most common reasons for presentation to a veterinary behaviorist. This problem is of particular interest because veterinary staff members, trainers, groomers, and other pet-care professionals regularly see early indicators of aggression, but may not recognize these signs. When we do not recognize the signs, and therefore fail to adjust our handling procedures, we tend to make the problems worse. Consequently, we send the animal home behaviorally worse then when it arrived. We may not see the consequences until the next visit, or further down the road, when the animal finally becomes aggressive in the hospital setting. We will not see the consequence if the increase in aggression affects the animal’s behavior in the home or outside environment. Fortunately, there are simple methods of preventing these problems altogether, and these methods can be implemented both by owners at home and by veterinary team members at the clinic. Veterinary hospitals can offer simple preventive behavior services that fully utilize the technician staff.

Which Animals Are Affected?
Aggression is a normal but inappropriate behavior that can develop in virtually any dog or cat. Indicators and risk factors begin early in life, but signs may not be obvious to owners for years. Because these pets are well behaved 99% of the time, owners have trouble recognizing that these behaviors are a problem.

One reason that aggression can develop in any animal has to do with developmental periods. When animals are born, they immediately enter a sensitive period for recognizing and bonding with family members and conspecifics. As they become more ambulatory, they enter into a period where they are fearful of novel objects and animals. This fear is a safety mechanism that protects animals from falling to predators and other dangers. Although fear is more intense during certain periods of development, overall fear of novel objects becomes the default setting in animals. The implications are that pets should be exposed to many novel sights, sounds, and experiences during their sensitive period for socialization (from approximately three weeks to three months of age in dogs and cats). If they are introduced to enough unfamiliar people, dogs, sights, and sounds, they will learn to generalize. A huge percentage of dogs and cats in the United States receive incomplete socialization during this early period because owners are told to keep the animals sequestered until vaccines have been completed.

Recognizing Fear in Dogs
Given that many animals do not receive adequate socialization during or after their sensitive period, the veterinary hospital experience is an especially anxiety-ridden situation. The crate, the car ride, and the exposure to unfamiliar people and animals, followed by uncomfortable or painful procedures, can exacerbate any fear. Consequently, it is important to recognize the signs of fear. Fear can be recognized through observation. When animals are in the waiting room and exam room, the following signs of fear may be observed:

- **Total body tension**: Does the animal have tense muscles or relaxed muscles?
- **Total bodyweight distribution**: Is the animal learning forward or backwards? Is the posture high or low?
- **Head**: Is the animal holding its head high, in a neutral position, or low?
- **Eyes**: Is the animal averting its gaze, glancing around quickly, or staring?
- **Ears**: Are the ears pricked forward, to the side, back, or down?
- **Tail**: Is the tail high, in a neutral position, low, or between the legs?
• *Appetite for treats:* Fearful and anxious animals tend not to eat when they are hungry. Thus, if an animal is willing to take treats in the lobby, but not in the exam room, this may indicate that the animal has become fearful.

In general, animals visiting a veterinary hospital should look relaxed and should actively solicit attention from staff. They should act as if they are enjoying the veterinary visit. Those that are overtly fearful, or just aloof, may actually be having a bad experience and should be placed on a preventive behavior modification program.

**Prepping Patients for Their Veterinary Visits**
Even before their first visit, owners should train their cats and small dogs to enjoy their travel carrier by having them regularly eat their meals in their open carrier (classical counterconditioning). They can do the same with the car.

In general, food should also be paired with the visit and with all procedures. Owners can be told to bring their pets in hungry so they will be more motivated by food. Then, all pets should be either offered treats in the waiting area and the examination rooms, or the owners should feed them treats (small kibble-sized treats).

**Greeting the Fearful Animal**
Many pets are not used to greeting strangers, especially in new environments where they are already anxious. The first seconds of a greeting can set the tone for the entire visit. If people walk directly into an animal’s personal space, or even stand and reach out to touch the animal, the animal may feel threatened. When approaching an unfamiliar dog in a hospital setting:

- If the dog looks relaxed and is actively soliciting your attention, it is probably safe to walk up and touch the dog while you are standing up straight.
- If the dog is not actively soliciting your attention, then approach in a relaxed manner, avert your gaze, and stop outside of the dog’s personal space.
- Hold a treat by your side and let the dog make first contact. If the dog wags, looks relaxed, and solicits attention, you may touch him while standing up straight. If you are unsure, you can time the petting while the dog eats a treat that you are holding for it.
- Avoid bending over the dog or suddenly squatting to its level. Doing so will invade the dog’s personal space. If the dog is fearful, it may snap at you. If you are unsure, time treats right when you are changing your body position or posture.

If you notice during any part of the visit that a dog or cat appears fearful or aloof, or if you have an owner with a new puppy or kitten, the animal can be enrolled in a behavior wellness program, which can be carried out by technicians. Owners can schedule two to four 20-minute sessions to work on desensitization and counterconditioning techniques or to train one of several key alternate desirable behaviors (operant counterconditioning). Because the techniques require good timing and assertive handling techniques on the owner’s part, each visit should be limited to just one or two exercises.

**Desensitization and Classical Counterconditioning**
Classical counterconditioning can be performed in many different ways, but some ways make the association clearer to animals than others. To countercondition to procedures, food should be paired with the procedures so the animal is handled only when it is eating the food, and the procedures should end right when the animal is finished eating the food. This timing makes the association between the food and the handling clear. Start with low-intensity handling. When the animal is comfortable with the low-intensity handling (ignores the handling), then gradually handle the animal more rigorously. When this technique is performed correctly, improvement can be seen in just minutes. When the trainer gives the animal treats, the food should be presented in a way that will ensure that the animal will hold its position when receiving the food, rather than having to strain to reach the food.

Animals should routinely be counterconditioned to pilling, rough handling of skin (for vaccines), having feet touched and held, and wearing muzzles. Technicians can schedule one or more short consults to train owners to practice these techniques at home.

**Shaping and Operant Counterconditioning**
One of the simplest desirable behaviors to teach both dogs and cats is to automatically sit to earn a treat. When the pet is trained in the exam room with a food treat, the owner learns that the pet can problem-solve, that it is the action of receiving the food reward (not the commands) that causes the pet to repeat the behavior, and that the technician or
veterinarian knows what he or she is doing. Cat owners learn that cats are trainable. This behavior then can serve as the foundation for training dogs (and cats) to look to their owners for leadership. Owners can require their dog to sit to earn all resources: food, all petting, to get the leash on, etc. By sitting automatically, the pet learns to control its emotions and impulses and learns to wait politely for direction from the owner. The behavior can then be modified to keep the pet’s attention and prevent the pet from performing other undesirable behaviors.

**When to Refer**

There are only benefits to having a behavior wellness package available for your clients. Behaviors can be addressed before they become a problem. If the technician is unsure about whether the animal is making progress, or if the animal is showing overt signs of aggression (growling, snapping, lunging), the clients can always be referred to a veterinarian specializing in behavior.

**Resources**

- Visit [www.AVSABonline.org](http://www.AVSABonline.org) to find out about topics related to animal behavior in veterinary care.