

PROTOCOL FOR HANDLING “SPECIAL-NEEDS PETS” DURING HOLIDAYS AND OTHER SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Your pet has been diagnosed with a behavioral condition, so it's helpful to think of the pet as a “special-needs” animal. Dogs and cats with special needs almost always improve, largely because we have helped you to provide them with a stable, kind, humane, non-abusive rule structure that relieves their anxieties by anticipating problems. As part of this rule structure, pet dogs and cats are asked to sit, relax, breathe calmly and deeply, and look to you for information that tells them that you will guide and reward them (see the **Protocol for Deference** and the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**). Most patients and clients do so wonderfully well that the clients often forget that the dog or cat was ever abnormal.

Unfortunately, novel, exciting, or busy social circumstances can often be provocative for the special-needs pet. Clients are often very hurt and upset when their pet experiences a breakthrough event under such circumstances. In the rare circumstance, the situation results in the death of the pet. More commonly, though, an otherwise happy circumstance becomes a sad, awkward, or stressful one. There is no need for this to occur. A relatively small amount of anticipation and thinking the potential problems through in advance can relieve your anxieties, and provide a more compassionate, less stressful experience for your pet.

Situations Involving Food

- If you know that your pet is aggressive or otherwise reactive around food, remember that holidays are big food events. Either do not have buffet-style meals, or baby gate or lock the pet in another room with an interactive toy or another pet to keep her occupied and to signal that she is not being punished. During the party visit the pet, and bring a small treat if this is something you can safely and routinely do. Make sure that the room can be locked and is locked from the outside. A very high hook-and-eye latch or a small sliding bolt can accomplish this. For adults, this will act as a signal not to open the door and allow the pet to escape; for children, it will prevent them from doing so. You can also post a note at adult eye level that explains why the door is locked and why you want your dog or cat to stay in the room so that you do not have to remember to remind everyone not to let her out. When people ignore or disbelieve the note, the lock at the top of the door will emphasize why they should comply.

Fearful Pets

- If you have a cat or dog that is fearful of new people, crowds, or noise, again, sequester her. This is not inhumane, exclusive, or unfair—it's the better choice for the pet. We understand that everyone wants to include pets in family events without worry. This is simply not realistic in most human families, so we should not expect our pets—especially those with special needs—to be able to accomplish this. Think of this as protecting or guarding your pets from circumstances that could be behaviorally injurious to them. And remember that every time your pet has an

adverse or negative experience involving fear or aggression, she learns from this and reinforces her inappropriate behavior. If one of the first steps of our treatment paradigm is to avoid all circumstances that provoke the pet, it makes sense that a logical step in the continued treatment and improvement of your pet should be to avoid placing her in a situation in which she may not be able—or should not be expected—to cope.

Situations Involving Visitors and Guests

- If your house is going to be full of visitors, please consider boarding the pet. If you are going to do this, you will need to plan ahead. First, boarding facilities book and fill early at holidays. Second, you want to make sure that the facility you choose will not make your pet worse—that the facility will be kind and humane and that it can meet the needs of your special pet. Third, you may want to see how your pet does when boarded under “no stress” circumstances, rather than introducing her to the situation during a busy holiday that is very stressful. If your pet doesn't tolerate boarding—and **many special-needs pets do not board well**—and she won't eat, loses weight, becomes withdrawn and unkempt, or becomes more fearful or aggressive, see if someone else in your family with whom your pet already has a good relationship can “pet sit.” Alternatively, you can establish a good relationship with a professional pet sitter. Check for members of the national organization in your area. If this is not an option, consider having all seasonal celebrations elsewhere—you could still host them—so that your pets can be happy and healthy in their own home while you party with your friends and relatives.

A Note About Pet Sitters

- Please consider only using pet sitters who are bonded and/or about whom you can get recommendations and with whom you have some innate comfort level. A good source for pet sitters for special-needs pets is your veterinarian, a certified professional dog trainer, or a client with another special-needs pet. Regardless, when looking for a pet sitter you want him to have two character traits for your special-needs dog or cat: he must be **responsible and reliable**.
 - The pet sitter **must** understand that loving the animal is not enough and that you have created a strategy for helping the dog or cat function as well and happily as she can, and that this strategy keeps everyone sane, safe and healthy.
 - If the pet sitter has a question, the sitter must call you, regardless of where you are in the world or the time of day.
 - If the problem behaviors begin to appear, the sitter must call you.
 - If something seems a little off, the sitter must call you.

When you can get this degree of responsibility and reliability from someone, hire them. Special-needs pets are not well served by being cared for by some random, well-meaning neighbor, especially if that neighbor is not an adult.

Special-needs pets are also not well served by being cared for by people who do not appreciate the behavioral needs in the way that you do.

Noise: Fears, Phobias, and Reactivity

- If your pets are afraid of noise—holidays like New Year's, Mardi Gras, Guy Fawkes Day in the United Kingdom, and, in the United States, the 4th of July, are hellish, nightmarish situations for these animals. The best prevention and treatment involves repeated medication with a short-acting anti-anxiety medication before and during the expected raucous explosion. This may not be possible with some aggressive pets. You will benefit from the information in the handout on **Protocol for Understanding and Treating Dogs with Noise and Storm Phobias**. Please make sure you get, read, and implement this handout if your dog or cat reacts to noises. Meanwhile, if you can decrease the dog's or cat's sensory perception in a way that is safe and helps them, this is worth considering. There are now eye goggles that fit many pets and that come with tinted lenses for those that react to visual displays (www.doggles.com); some dogs and cats will tolerate eye masks primarily intended for beauty treatments or air travel; and ear muffs exist that will help cancel out noise (www.muttmuffs.com). Such tools may have a place in your toolbox.

Situations Involving Children

- If your pets have never seen children and families with multiple kids plan to visit, *caution is urged*. Cats should either be elsewhere and safe or on harnesses, if they are accustomed to them, and dogs should be on head collars at the first introduction to the children. The children should be of an age and temperament that they will follow your instructions and not deliberately or inadvertently provoke the pet. If the children cannot or will not do this—or if their parents are not willing or able to supervise them or think that you are overly and unreasonably concerned—sequester the pet as above. Don't worry about what anyone thinks of you and don't let anyone bully or embarrass you: You know you are being humane to and protective of the pet, and you are the only one responsible for that pet's continued well-being and improvement. Please also remember that children who have been well-behaved and non-threatening one-on-one may not behave the same way in a group. Here, the way the pet responds to them will be more than the sum of the parts. Caution is urged. If you have children, even if they have a good relationship with your pet, please remember that your children will not behave the same way when the house is full of people during a holiday as they would during a regular day. This means that their relationship with the pet may change and, or their behavior may change in a way that scares the pet. Again, err on the side of minimizing the cost of error to the pet.

Protective and Territorial Pets

- Please remember that many pets who are excessively or inappropriately protective or territorial will be made more anxious and worsened by the frequent coming and going of delivery people and guests. Accordingly, they will be

more reactive. The busier you are, the more likely you are to be unable to accurately assess the pet's concern. Again, sequestering the pet—even if just behind a baby gate—will allow you to proceed at a more realistic and safer pace.

The Role of Exercise

- Please make sure—particularly if you have a special-needs dog—that your pet is well exercised before the big event. The more aerobic exercise your pet gets, the calmer she will be. Exercise her early in the day before a party and again just before it. Use the pet's standard for real aerobic exercise and tiredness, not yours. You will tire first. Using the pet's standard will take more time, but tired pets are less anxious and more calmly behaved.

Food, Diet, and Schedules

- Try to stick to as regular a schedule as possible for your pet and try to stick to the pet's regular diet. The more disruptions, the more unstable the pet will be. Also, if she has an upset stomach, vomiting, or diarrhea because of too many rich foods, she will be more unstable, more reactive, more anxious, and more unpredictable. Neither you nor your pet need this.

Problems with Yards and Kennels

- Please remember that putting an aggressive or fearful dog in the backyard is not a solution.
 - First, the dog is not protected from others—dogs or humans—who can enter the yard or look over the fence.
 - Second, if people are milling around—particularly children—they can and will open the door to the yard. This could be tragic and it can absolutely be avoided.Under no circumstances should dogs of any kind be left chained or “tied out.” These dogs are trapped and will be more reactive. In fact, dogs maintained under these conditions are overrepresented on some sets of dog bite statistics. This is beyond dangerous—it is inhumane for the dog.

Can a Crate Help?

- Please remember that unless your pet is already comfortable in a crate, enjoys it, and cannot be disturbed by others when in it, the use of a crate will actually make the situation more stressful for you and your pet. Also, remember that some dogs with separation anxiety cannot bear to be locked up and panic when trapped. The crate is an entrapment for these dogs. Finally, many animals in crates or behind fences or grates are more—not less—aggressive than when they are loose. That barrier gives them a physical boundary which they may feel they have to defend, but which also prevents them from choosing the option of withdrawal. People have the foolish tendency to reach through gates or over gates. Never, ever let anyone do this, stare at an animal that is crated, or get close enough to stick anything through the crate. If you decide to crate your pet and your pet has a known history of enjoying the crate, make sure that the crate is in a quiet area that prohibits deliberate or inadvertent tormenting of what is now a trapped animal.

Inviting the Pet to the Party

- If you think your pet is sufficiently improved that she can be “invited” to the party, pick your parties. Smaller groups of controllable adults who know of the problem, like pets, and are willing to comply with your instructions on how to interact with the pet are your best bet. You can introduce dogs on leashes and head collars and cats on leashes and harnesses, if they are accustomed to them. The first time your dog or cat acts distressed or a human responds in a way that worries you, put the pet in a safe place. Whatever you do, please remember that people who are afraid of pets or uncertain about them or who have never had them, people who are physically or behaviorally impaired (alcohol ingestion comes to mind), and children pose the worst risks for distressed, special-needs pets. Please remember that many abandoned and rehomed pets have experienced abuse when near someone who is chemically impaired and so may react with anxiety or fear to the smell of substances like marijuana or alcohol.

Stress, Stress, and More Stress

- Please remember the law of multiple stressors: The more often you and your pet are subjected to stressful or

unexpected situations, the more likely the pet will react inappropriately to the situation. Watch your pet—if your social life during the holidays is too much for your pet, please consider some of the other options recommended in this handout. A small amount of attending to your pet’s signals and anticipation of their needs and concerns can avoid tragic disasters.

Guilt, Love, and Guardianship

- Finally, do not feel that by sequestering your pet away you have let your dog or cat down, or that she is paying dearly for your social life. You would be letting her down only if you placed her in an upsetting situation where she became more fearful or aggressive. These recommendations are compromises that allow you to work with difficult situations with as little worry as possible. If you give yourself the time to sit down and list the circumstances in which you think your pet might become distressed during these very social times, you will be able to anticipate how to avoid them. Timing is critical here: do not wait until the last minute when you are forced to react rather than to plan or prevent. If you err on the side of caution, you will find that you and your pet will have a far more enjoyable holiday, and one that is relatively risk-free.