

The Spectrum of Cooperative Care

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What is Cooperative Care?

Veterinary medicine has historically been a process of working **on** animals, preventing and reversing suffering and promoting health. Cooperative care is working **with** animals. This means meeting both pets and people where they are and helping them achieve their care wants and needs while holding space for the emotional needs of all the beings involved.

Why is this Relevant?

Working with animals (including human animals!) has many benefits:

- Decreased Fear, Anxiety, and Stress (FAS) for pets in our care
- Decreased FAS for pet families
- Increased physical safety for veterinary providers (and all pet professionals)
- Increased emotional safety for humans and animals
- Potential for longer careers in vetmed for veterinary professionals
- Increased job satisfaction
- Increased visit frequency by pet families
- More visits = better care
- More visits = better financial health for pet professionals

What is the Spectrum of Cooperative Care?

Cooperative Care exists along a broad spectrum from the simple use of observing body language and using touch gradient with distractions all the way to completely unrestrained veterinary care using exclusively specific trained sexy behaviors.

The entire spectrum of care can enhance welfare for pets and people: but only if it meets their needs and abilities.

The following factors (among others) can influence which methods are selected for individual teams and situations:

- Does the pet have pre-existing fear of the procedure or of handling in general?
- Is the family motivated and interested in the process?
- What is the family's desired end-point of training?
- What is the skill level of the professional(s) involved?
- Is the pet going to receive serial/repeated exposures to a specific treatment or procedure?
- How does the family's financial situation mesh with the level of need of their pet?

Defining Success

Each family will define success or the desired end-point of training in an individual way. One important service we provide as professionals is matching our recommended treatment plan to the overall goals of the family.

For some patients, a successful end-point of training may simply be wearing safety equipment like a muzzle and receiving appropriate sedation without undue FAS. For other patients, success may look like unrestrained venipuncture, open-mouth oral exam, or other advanced behaviors. Neither of these outcomes is good or bad. They both represent success and they both represent great pet care.

It can be easy to accidentally jump to insisting on a complex training plan for things like physical examination, injections, venipuncture, grooming, and more. After all, training is FUN for these skills! Fun is a tricky word though. Fun is in the eye of the beholder. Sometimes what's fun for pet professionals is not fun or is even scary for pet families.

Just because we *can* train a tiger to give a voluntary blood sample, that does not mean we *must* do so for pets. It's imperative to match families with the right care plan for success. Further, just because we *can* distract a puppy with peanut butter for a nail trim doesn't mean we *should* do so long term, depending on the puppy! Knowing when and how to select certain methods for certain teams is a combination of the science and the art of training.

Tools for Selecting a Training Plan

While every case will be unique, using some algorithms to guide your decision-making process can help match training plans with pet families and veterinary care teams.

The attached flow-sheet is intended to be an introduction to possible decision making processes around the spectrum of cooperative care.

