CABC 2026

Constructional Affection in Action:

An Easy, Practical, and Effective New Skill for the Veterinary Team's Toolkit



Dr. Sean Will

CAAWT
CONSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH TO ANIMAL WELFARE AND TRAINING

1

Bruce



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2

No More Bruces!



3

No More Bruces!

- With so many experts and decades of experience training animals to do extraordinary things (steal documents, spy on people, scent detection, and much more) **how is it that there is so much difficulty learning to live together?**
  - There are no shortage of different approaches and opinions
  - Even when trying everything, it seems like sometimes we still don't succeed

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No More Bruces!

- There is a lot of confusion over **what makes a good relationship and how to build them**
  - Obedient dogs (dogs that sit, stay, come, down) = Good dogs
  - Giving food treats pairs us with good things
- Perhaps there is a lot more to relationships than obedience or giving food treats
  - Why do we like hanging out with our friends?

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No More Bruces!

- **Social behaviors** are often left out of the discussion or are thought to emerge "naturally" through giving things / pairing, or through time
- Social behaviors involve interactions between two or more individuals with respect to the environment (Lindsley, 1963)
- Social interactions should be maintained by the fun of the interaction itself – Much like our interactions with our friends
  - The reinforcers come from the other person's behavior!
- **How do we achieve this with our animal companions?**

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Animal Shelters

- One of the main reasons dogs stay at shelters for extended periods of time, get re-homed, or euthanized is behavior problems
- Many shelter dogs, due to their history, **do not know how to ask for or receive interaction from humans** in a way that is desirable for the humans
  - They engage in **jumping, barking, mouthing, nipping, mounting, separation anxiety** to obtain access to people and their interaction

(ASPCA, 2021)

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Goal: Getting dogs adopted and keeping them adopted!

- Recent research suggests that obedience training does not increase the likelihood of getting adopted
- **Sociability** – How dogs interact with unfamiliar people
- **Dogs that approach humans and lie next to them** are **14.47 times** more likely to be adopted



(Sternberg, 2003; Bentosela et al., 2016; Protopopova & Wynne, 2014)

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Creating "You picked me!"



When potential adopters pass their enclosure, **the dog approaches the front, keeps all four paws on the ground, sits, or lies down, and looks at the people** → People are more likely to want to meet and interact with the dog

At the meet-and-greet area, **the dog approaches the front, keeps all four paws on the ground, sits, or lies down to ask for and receive affection** → People are more likely to bring the dog home and love them forever

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Assessment First

- We do an assessment with every shelter dog we meet
  - Ask the shelter staff if the dog is good with people generally
  - Perform the CAAWT Assessment Method through a fenced in area before meeting the dog
    - We do brief assessments on the next visits too
  - Assessment is critical to keep everyone safe as well as understand the function of behavior

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Assessment First

- If the dog's behavior is maintained by **human attention**, we will use **Constructional Affection**
- If the dog's behavior is maintained by **getting space/distance from people**, we will not use Constructional Affection, instead **Constructional Aggression Treatment (CAT)** would be a likely procedure

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11



12

Constructional Affection

Affection: Petting, gentle scratching, and other similar tactile contact

Interaction Guidelines → **Affection Loop**

- Teaches animals how to ask for and receive affection
- Takes the behaviors built to new situations

(Will & Nishimuta, 2026)

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13

Interaction Guidelines with Dogs

Pet: Long soft stroke as if putting the baby to sleep

Dog does	We do
The dog looks in our direction and/or approaches us	Offer hands at dog's eye level
When the dog is within arm's reach and all four paws are on the ground	Pet with one hand
Any paws come off the ground or the dog leaves	Pause petting by keeping hands still
All four paws return to the ground or the dog returns within arm's reach	Pet with one hand
At any point if the dog sits or lies down	Pet with two hands, get closer, and pour lots of love!

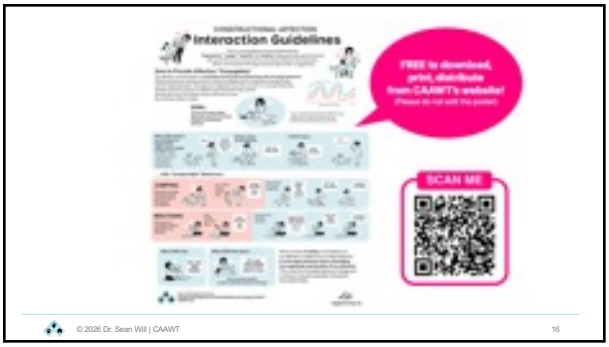
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14



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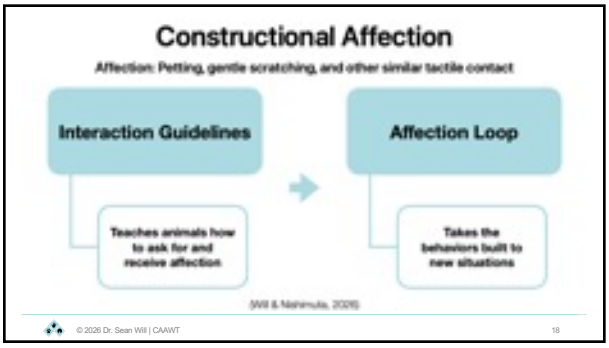
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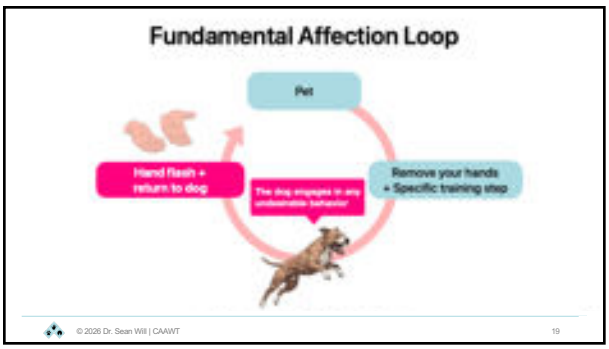
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Proceed to the Affection Loop when the Interaction Guidelines are mastered:
The dog can lie down while receiving affection for at least 30 seconds

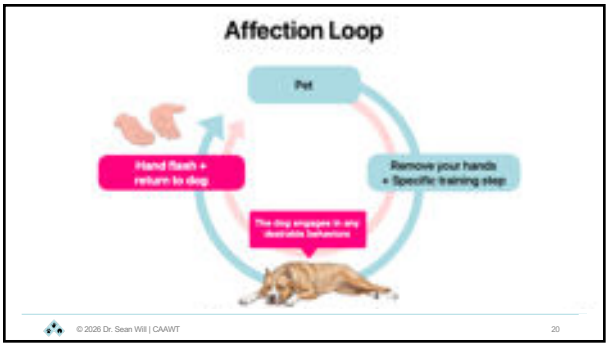
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18


Fundamental Affection Loop
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
The dog engages in any undesirable behavior
Remove your hands + Specific training step
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19


Affection Loop
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
Remove your hands + Specific training step
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20


Hand-flash
The hand flash serves two purposes:
Tells the dog/animal they did something good
"That's the behavior I like!"
Tells the dog/animal to get ready to receive affection
"I will return and pet!"
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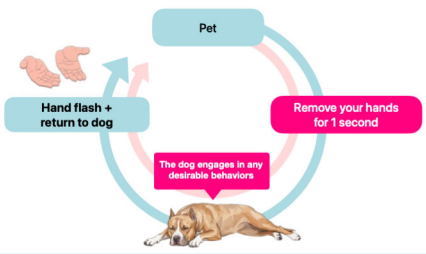
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Building a Short Affection Loop

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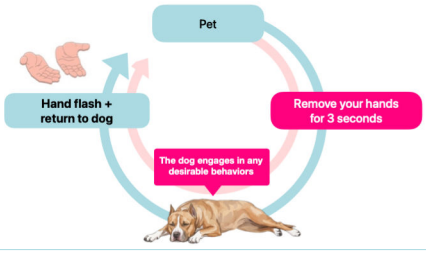
Affection Loop



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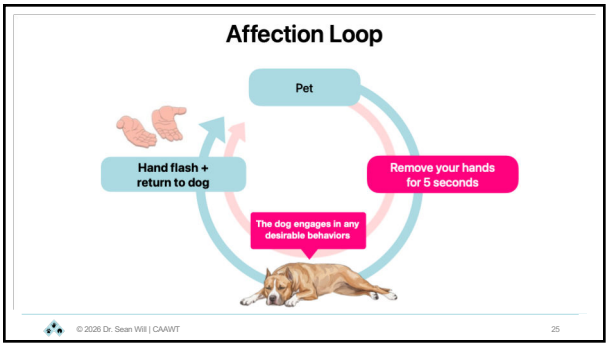
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Affection Loop

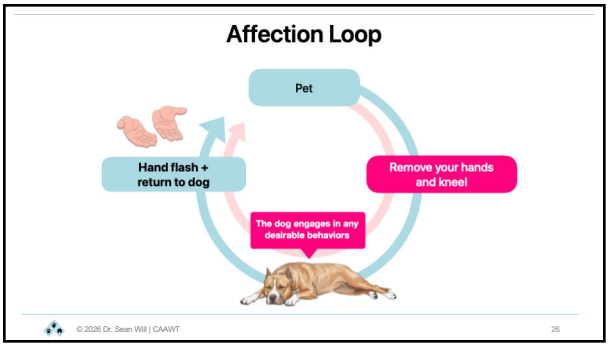


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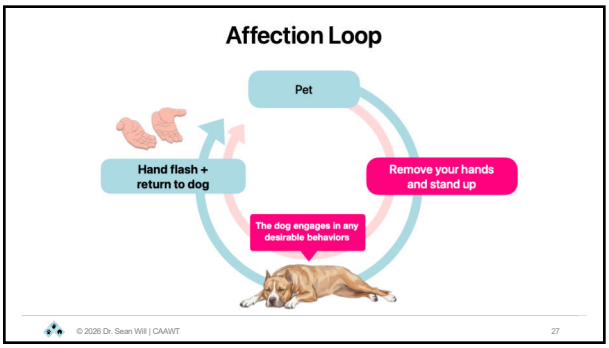
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Affection Loop
Pet
Remove your hands for 5 seconds
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
Hand flash + return to dog
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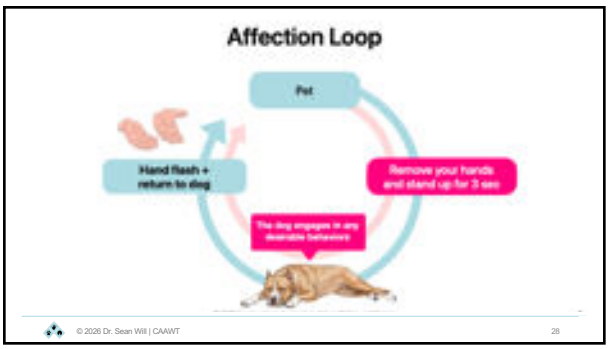
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Affection Loop
Pet
Remove your hands and kneel
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
Hand flash + return to dog
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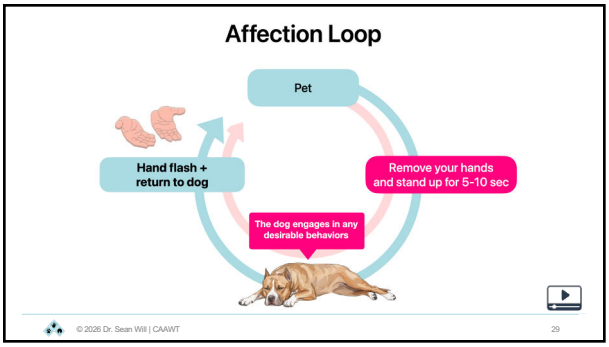
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Affection Loop
Pet
Remove your hands and stand up
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
Hand flash + return to dog
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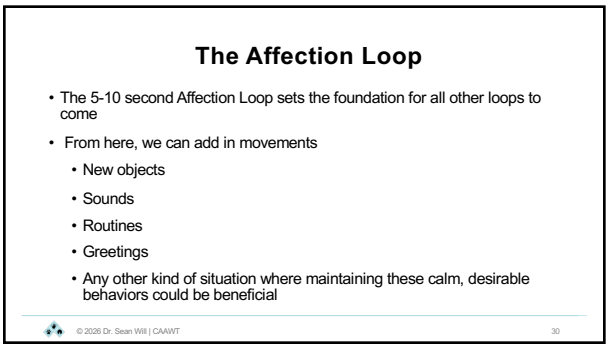
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Affection Loop
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands and stand up for 5 sec
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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28


Affection Loop
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands and stand up for 5-10 sec
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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29


The Affection Loop
• The 5-10 second Affection Loop sets the foundation for all other loops to come
• From here, we can add in movements
• New objects
• Sounds
• Routines
• Greetings
• Any other kind of situation where maintaining these calm, desirable behaviors could be beneficial
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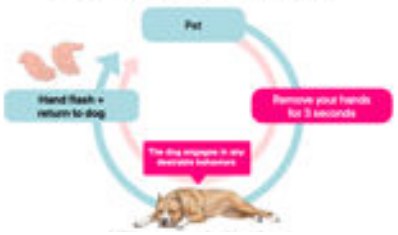
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Affection Loop: Ear Exam Prep

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31

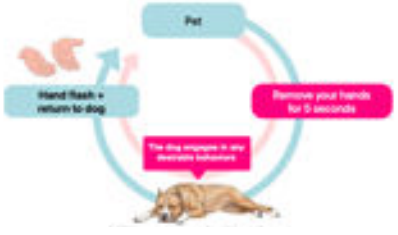
Affection Loop: Ear exam prep



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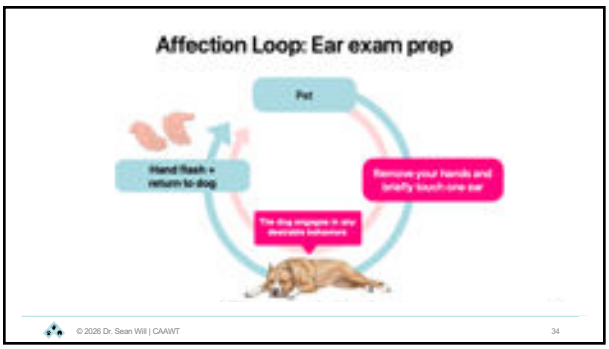
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep

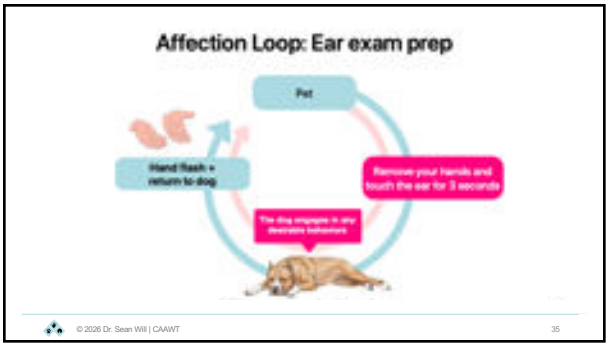


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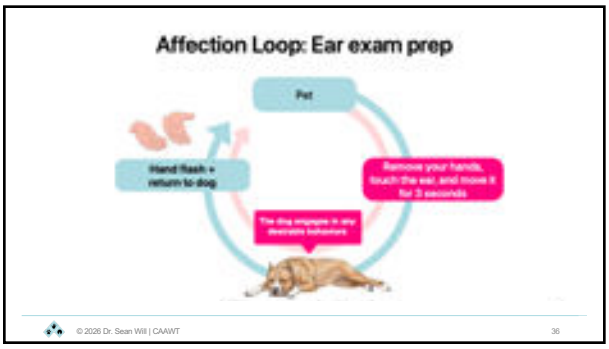
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands and briefly touch one ear
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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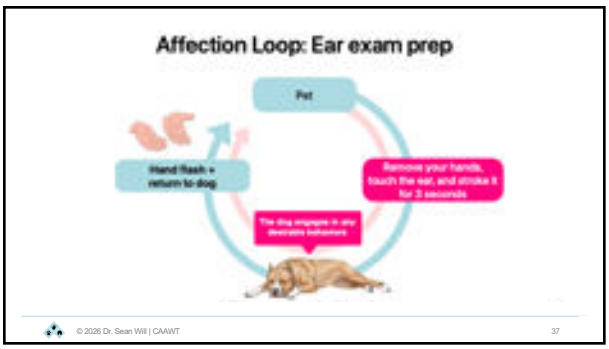
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands and touch the ear for 3 seconds
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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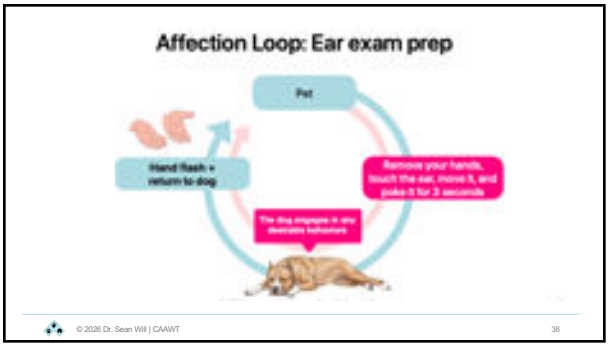
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands, touch the ear, and move it for 3 seconds
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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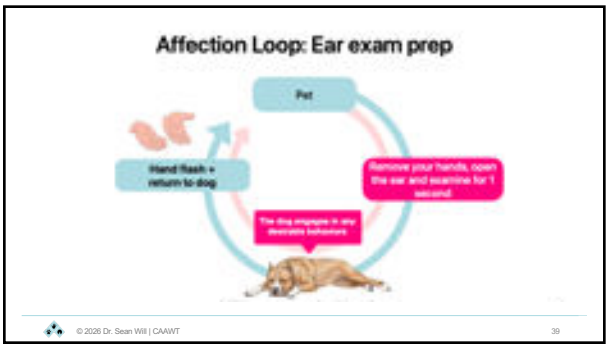
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands, touch the ear, and stroke it for 3 seconds
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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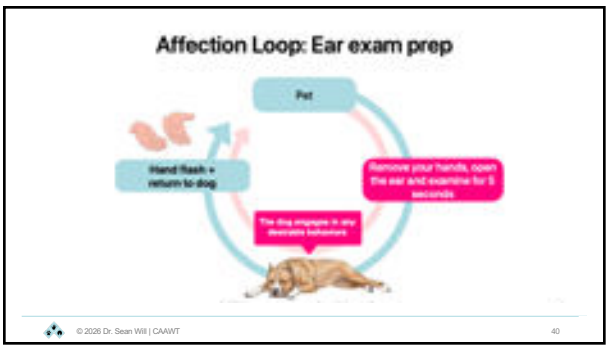
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands, touch the ear, move it, and poke it for 3 seconds
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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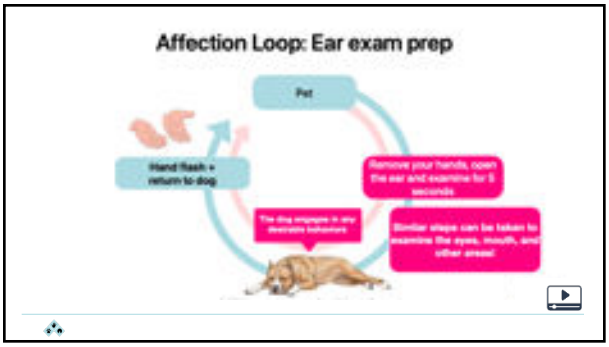
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands, open the ear and examine for 1 second
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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39


Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands, open the ear and examine for 5 seconds
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
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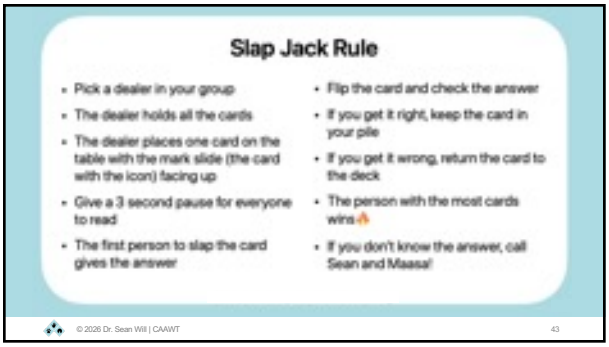
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Affection Loop: Ear exam prep
Pet
Hand flash + return to dog
Remove your hands, open the ear and examine for 5 seconds
The dog engages in any desirable behaviors
Similar steps can be taken to examine the eyes, mouth, and other areas!

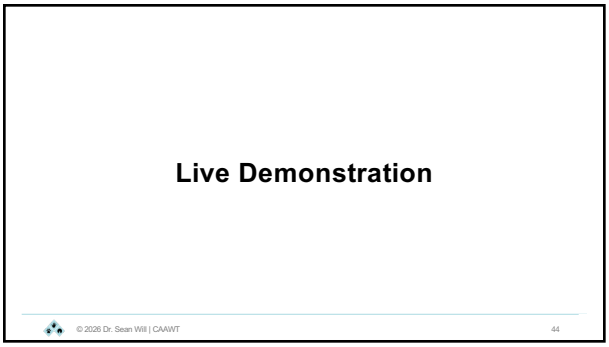
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SLAP JACK GAME
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42


Slap Jack Rule
Pick a dealer in your group
The dealer holds all the cards
The dealer places one card on the table with the mark slide (the card with the icon) facing up
Give a 3 second pause for everyone to read
The first person to slap the card gives the answer
Flip the card and check the answer
If you get it right, keep the card in your pile
If you get it wrong, return the card to the deck
The person with the most cards wins
If you don't know the answer, call Sean and Maasa!
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43


Live Demonstration
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44


Thank You!
There are many wonderful procedures, communities, and trainers available to us
We hope the Constructional Approach can help when needing guidance on which procedure or approach to take and how to implement the training
The Constructional Approach is not a procedure – It is an entire way to go about training
ALL kinds of training can be done Constructionally!
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45

Thank You!

- Constructional Affection can be a powerful tool to add to your repertoires because our interactions are so reinforcing for many of the dogs we live with
  - Establish or strengthen bonds between people and their animals
  - Make medical and grooming routines easier and less stressful for the animal, veterinary/nurse, and the family

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46



47