



## MEET THE AUTHOR



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Debbie has been a fulltime registered/licensed veterinary technician since 1996 and worked in private practice for 14 years.

Since 2005, she has been the animal behavior technician for Veterinary Behavior Consultations, LLC. She assists Kenneth Martin, DVM, DACVB, during behavior consultations. Debbie is a co-owner of TEAM Education in Animal Behavior, LLC. She is a contributing author and coeditor of the textbook *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*, as well as a coauthor of the book *Puppy Start Right: Foundation Training for the Companion Dog and the Karen Pryor Academy course "Puppy Start Right for Instructors."* Debbie is honored to be representing veterinary technicians on the Fear Free<sup>SM</sup> executive council.

# Technician-Driven Preventive Behavior Services

Undesirable behavior in pets results in a weakened human–animal bond and can lead to relinquishment. Behavior concerns are the number-one cause for pet relinquishment; in one study, 40% of pets were relinquished to shelters for behavior issues.<sup>1</sup> In another study, the number-one behavior reason for relinquishment of both dogs and cats was house soiling.<sup>2</sup> Through preventive behavior services, veterinary technicians can educate clients on proper techniques for addressing normal behavior challenges in their pets and thus help preserve the human–animal bond.

Preventive services that can be offered in the hospital and implemented by or with the assistance of a veterinary technician or other trained professional include:

- Preventive care visits
- Pet selection counseling
- Puppy socialization classes
- Kitten classes
- Fun visits
- Victory visits
- Veterinary visit preparation classes
- Private training or behavior modification sessions

## BEST BEHAVIOR

Through preventive behavior services, veterinary technicians can educate clients on proper techniques for addressing normal behavior challenges in their pets and thus help preserve the human–animal bond.

### PREVENTIVE CARE VISITS

If you are in general practice, you are already doing preventive care visits! Incorporating behavior questions into the history taking is a simple, but imperative, step. Clients are not always forthcoming with behavioral concerns. They may be embarrassed that their cat is peeing on the carpet or that their 1-year-old dog is chewing the couch when home alone. By screening for common behavior concerns, veterinary technicians can identify situations before the human–animal bond is irreparably damaged.

Consider adding a specific preventive care visit for dogs and cats that are between 8 and 12 months old to address behavior concerns that have developed since the routine puppy and kitten examination series. Most pets relinquished to shelters are between 5 months and 3 years of age (47.4% of dogs and 40.3% of cats) and have been owned between 7 months and 1 year (37.1% of dogs and 30.2% of cats).<sup>3</sup> This is a period in which many are not brought to a veterinary hospital. By reaching out and suggesting a behavioral checkup during this time, veterinary technicians can provide early intervention. If behavior concerns are detected, appropriate services based on the behavioral challenges can be recommended, such as private training, group classes, or referral to a veterinary behaviorist.

### PET SELECTION COUNSELING

Pet selection counseling is the first defense against preventing behavior problems and the first offense in influencing a strong human–animal bond. Educating and preparing the prospective pet owner are the primary goals of this service. Misconceptions regarding expectations, preventive care, and training can be discovered and addressed. The new pet owner not only will be better prepared but also can set their new companion up for success. This service can be offered as a private or group session for prospective pet owners.

### PUPPY SOCIALIZATION CLASSES

A true puppy socialization class restricts the age of participants to the socialization period (up to 12 to 16 weeks of age). Because the socialization period wanes between 3 and 4 months of age, puppies should complete the class by age 14 to 16 weeks. Because the puppies will not be fully vaccinated, this includes adhering to strict guidelines and having vaccination and health status protocols as well as facility cleaning protocols in place to minimize disease risks. A study found that puppies aged ≤16 weeks that attended socialization classes were at no greater risk of parvovirus than those that did not attend classes.<sup>4</sup>

Arguably, early proper socialization and attendance in puppy socialization classes can decrease relinquishment by preventing behavior problems. The main focus at this age is not on manners training but on creating positive experiences for the puppy and teaching puppy owners appropriate and humane techniques for addressing normal puppy behavior. A reputable puppy socialization class provides a safe environment for exploration and exposure to a variety of stimuli in a controlled and positive manner. The benefits of puppy socialization classes include:

- Preventing behavior problems
- Decreasing pet relinquishment
- Bonding the client to the puppy and your facility
- Educating puppy parents on normal canine development and humane training techniques
- Acclimating puppies to handling and routine veterinary procedures
- Allowing early intervention for high-risk puppies (ie, puppies removed from the litter before 8 weeks of age; that have increased fear, anxiety, and/or hyperexcitability; that have shown aggression over resources or with handling; or that have had a serious illness before 4 months of age)
- Helping all puppies reach their full potential

A good resource regarding the importance of offering puppy classes is available at [avsabonline.org](http://avsabonline.org), under Position Statements. Other resources are listed in **BOX 1**.

#### BOX 1 Resources for Behavior Services

##### Online

- Fear Free<sup>SM</sup> Foundations for Kittens and Puppies course: [fearfreepets.com](http://fearfreepets.com)
- Kitten classes: [drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/kitty-kindergarten-learn-how-to-teach-early-kitten-socialization-classes-wi/](http://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/kitty-kindergarten-learn-how-to-teach-early-kitten-socialization-classes-wi/)
- Puppy socialization classes: [puppystartright.com](http://puppystartright.com)
- Victory visits: [veterinaryteam.dvm360.com/what-heck-victory-visit](http://veterinaryteam.dvm360.com/what-heck-victory-visit)

##### Print

- Martin KM, Martin DA. *Puppy Start Right: Foundation Training for the Companion Dog*. 2nd ed. Waltham, MA: Sunshine Books; 2011.
- Shaw J, Martin D, eds. *Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses*. Ames, IA: Wiley; 2015.

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### KITTEN CLASSES

Kittens attending a class should be less than 14 weeks old; kittens older than 14 weeks are more likely to fight than play with each other. As with puppy classes, health and cleaning protocols must be in place to minimize disease risks. The benefits of offering kitten classes in your hospital include:

- Creating a strong bond between the owner and the kitten, as well as your hospital
- Educating owners regarding normal feline development and behavior
- Coaching owners on responsible cat ownership and management
- Providing a safe and controlled environment for exposure and desensitization to veterinary procedures
- Identifying and preventing behavior problems

### FUN VISITS

A “fun visit” refers to the pet visiting the hospital just for fun. No medical procedures are performed. If you are offering kitten and puppy classes in your hospital, attendees are having a fun visit when they come to class. Once the participants have graduated, it is important that they continue to return to the hospital for good experiences. Continued fun visits help build a positive emotional response and memories with your facility. Because fun visits are informal, they do not necessarily need to be scheduled. However, it may be helpful to post suggested times for fun visits that correspond with less traffic in the lobby or reception area.

Because fun visits are a preventive behavior service, they are appropriate and should be encouraged for all pets that do not already have an established fear associated with the veterinary hospital. During a fun visit, owners should focus on creating a positive association with the hospital by incorporating things the dog or cat enjoys, such as special treats, a special meal, toys/play, or even

grooming (for pets that enjoy being brushed). For example, a dog might get some special treats for being in the waiting room, getting on the scale, and going into an examination room. In the examination room, the owner might pull out the dog’s favorite toy and play with him. For cats, the owner can let the cat explore an examination room and provide a special meal, play with the cat with a favorite toy, and/or brush the cat.

Fun visits implemented in this manner generally do not require direct team member assistance. Clients complete the visit on their own, and it is usually a complimentary service.

### VICTORY VISITS

In contrast to fun visits, a victory visit is a scheduled session that involves a qualified team member. These visits may be set up as short (15- to 30-minute) private sessions. To maximize efficiency, it may help to schedule them during a block of time each week—for example, every Tuesday between 12:00 to 2:00 pm.

The focus of victory visits is not just on making the veterinary hospital a fun place but also acclimating the pet to gentle control/restraint and veterinary equipment. Victory visits can be a preventive service to work on conditioning to veterinary procedures and manipulations or an intervention service for



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**FUN VISITS** help build a positive emotional response and memories with your facility.

a pet that has established fear, anxiety, and stress associated with the veterinary hospital. If the pet has an established fear of the hospital or handling, there has been a previous negative experience that the pet needs to overcome. Trust and positive associations can take several visits to establish.

Because victory visits require a trained and skilled team member to implement the techniques effectively, the client should be charged appropriately for the service. Many clients will be willing to pay for this service to make their pet more comfortable coming to your hospital and to learn how to provide care at home.

### VETERINARY VISIT PREPARATION CLASSES

Offering a group class centered on making the veterinary visit and at-home pet care more enjoyable for the pet is another sensible option. These classes are an extension of puppy and kitten classes, but with complete focus on training operant behaviors for voluntary cooperative care. Such classes teach pets to perform cued behaviors such as sit, stand, and lie on their side to aid in positioning for procedures, going to a mat or station to be able to get an accurate weight, or even performing a “chin rest” to keep their head still during a blood draw or ear cleaning. Veterinary visit preparation classes not only set pets and owners up for success, but also make the work of the veterinary team easier and more enjoyable.



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**PRIVATE TRAINING AND BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION SESSIONS** are scheduled appointments with a qualified team member to address manners and preventive training.

## TECHPOINT

Veterinary visit preparation classes not only set pets and owners up for success, but also make the work of the veterinary team easier and more enjoyable.

### PRIVATE TRAINING AND BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION SESSIONS

Private training and behavior modification sessions are scheduled appointments with a qualified team member to address manners and preventive training. Generally, behavior modification implies the treatment of an existing fear or anxiety. Depending on the situation, a veterinary behavioral diagnosis and treatment plan may be needed before behavior modification sessions can be considered. However, for a mild apprehension, such as avoidance of nail trimmers, a behavior modification session to coach owners on how to appropriately condition a dog or cat to a situation (eg, nail trimming) would be considered preventive. Private training sessions could also be scheduled for activities like teaching owners how to acclimate their cat to wearing a harness or their dog to wearing a headcollar.

### CONCLUSION

Veterinary technicians can take on the role of the preventive behavior services coordinator and disseminate crucial information regarding animal behavior and training to clients and team members. By providing behavior services, you can help keep pets in their homes, improve pet welfare, save pets' lives, retain pets at your hospital, provide a new profit center for the hospital, and enhance your career and job satisfaction. ■

### References

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4. Stepida ME, Bain MJ, Kass PH. Frequency of CPV infection in vaccinated puppies that attended puppy socialization classes. *J Am Anim Hosp Assoc* 2013;49(2):95-100.