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Building Trust With An Animal

Every pet owner wants to have a good relationship wit their animal. Often, this can occur relatively quickly especially when the animal is obtained at a young age or they have a very friendly and outgoing temperament. Some animals, however, are more stand-offish and are very reserved when it comes to trusting people. Many people believe this is due to past trauma or abuse especially if it is a rescue animal. This is thankfully uncommon and it is more likely to be due to a combination of genetics and poor or no socialization in the past especially when the animal was young. With these animals, they often take time to trust or enjoy the company of new people which can be very hard on an owner's new partner or visiting family members. If your cat or dog has trouble trusting people, there are some things you can do.

Note: If your animal is displaying aggressive behaviour towards new people, if they are displaying significant anxiety issues (such as destructive behaviour, vocalization etc.) or if they are showing other concerning behaviours, we would highly recommend talking to your regular vet first. They may recommend a behaviour consult with Dr. Cousins (more info in the last paragraph) as proceeding with this training with an aggressive animal can be dangerous without certain precautions.

- **Getting Started**
    - Identify food rewards that the animal really enjoys. Reserve the best for training purposes only (do not give them out for other purposes).
        - Food is the most commonly used reward but you can reward them with their favorite game if they aren't food motivated. In addition, playing a game together can be a great way to bond with an animal.
    - Determine what your animal's triggers are. These are things that make them uncomfortable or that they react to. It may be strangers in general, new people touching them or a new person getting too close to their owner. Each animal is different so take some time to learn where your animal's limits are. Make sure to tell visitors and other people who will be interacting with the animal what their triggers are before they even see the animal.
    - Familiarize yourself with animal body language. Many animals will use subtle changes in their ears, tail, body and face to communicate discomfort but this can be difficult for

many people to reliably see. The better you are able to tell how an animal is feeling the better you can respond appropriately.

- Some resources on cat body language:
  - https://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/new-poster-the-body-language-of-feline-anxiety/
  - https://www.tuftandpaw.com/blogs/cat-guides/the-definitive-guide-to-cat-behavior-and-body-language
  - https://www.winnipeghumanesociety.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Reading-a-Cats-Body-Language.pdf
- Some resources on dog body language:
  - https://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/dog-bite-prevention-week-poster-on-the-body-language-of-fear-and-aggression/
  - https://centerforshelterdogs.tufts.edu/dog-behavior/dog-communication-and-body-language/
  - https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/advice/how-to-read-dog-body-language/

- **Training For Trust**
  - If you are the owner or are regularly interacting with the animal, choose clear cues to indicate how you want to interact. These cues should be used consistently (use the same cue for the same interaction every time). Inconsistent cues will be confusing to the animal.
    - E.g. Placing the hairbrush out to indicate grooming or rubbing your fingers together to indicate head rubs.
    - Make sure to communicate these signals to anyone who may be interacting with the animal so they can be consistent too.
  - Any new introductions should start by giving the person some of the tasty treats you have chosen in the previous step. They should have these on their person before meeting the animal so that as soon as they enter, they can gently toss some treats on the ground near the animal. This should help the animal associate the new person with tasty treats (and thus, positive emotions). More treats can be gently tossed if the animal does decide to investigate further.
    - If safe to do so (i.e. no diabetes or other medical conditions which require consistent feeding), you can feed a smaller meal on a day when visitors are coming over or have visitors come over at meal time and give out tasty treats as well as their meal food.
  - Keep your movements slow, your voice low and calm and do your best to ignore the animal at first. This will make you less threatening and will encourage the animal to investigate on their own terms
  - When touching the animal (if they allow touching, do not force this), avoid sensitive areas like the paws, tail or belly. Instead focus on scratching or petting the shoulder blades as this area tend to be better tolerated. In addition, cats are generally not fond of long interactions. Instead, they generally prefer short and frequent interactions (on

average lasting about 3 seconds). A few pets on the head are often all they want when saying hello.

○ Avoid reaching over top of the animal's head or standing over them as this can be very intimidating. Instead, reach to the sides to pet the shoulder blades and crouch down to the dog's level (if safe to do so).

- **Common Mistakes**
    - o **The Problem:** Many people will use food to lure a wary animal in to touch them. This is often not helpful and can sometimes make the animal more wary of people and the food.
        - ▪ **Instead:** food should be offered freely from people they are wary of; The animal does not have to "earn it" but rather we are teaching the animal that new people mean good things happen. Over time, this should associate those positive feelings with the new person and cause them to seek out interactions, rather than you forcing it on them in exchange for food

    - o **The Problem:** Animals can be hard to ignore (especially when meeting them for the first time) and it can be very tempting to immediately approach them. However, staring, loud voices, reaching towards them or other interactions that might be fine with a friendly animal, are more likely to intimidate and frighten a wary animal.
        - ▪ **Instead:** do your best to ignore them, provide tasty food at a distance and let them come to you on their own pace. This is much more likely to get them to feel comfortable and confident around you.

    - o **The Problem:** Some owners will try to restrict their animals' ability to escape (using a leash or physically holding them) so that the new person can interact with them and the animal can learn that the new person isn't scary. Unfortunately, this approach seldom works and can even worsen their fear. Restraining an animal's ability to escape usually heightens their fear and forcing interactions they are already nervous about can make these interactions even more scary.
        - ▪ **Instead:** Provide tasty treats at a distance and give animals space to retreat if they are uncomfortable. An animal that feels like it can escape if it needs to is much more likely to keep calm and will feel more comfortable around you then if they feel trapped.

    - o **The Problem:** We often forget that animals do not easily communicate with us and often require consistent teaching to learn how and why people interact with them. Giving a big hug to a friendly lab may be appropriate if that dog has already learned that this is a way that humans show their affection and approval but it will likely scare and intimidate a nervous dog. Regardless of how friendly you are trying to be, your actions may be seen very differently through the eyes of an animal.

- **Instead:** Practice communicating with the animal using clear and understandable signals to tell them how to interact. If you are not the owner, check to see if the animal already knows some signals so you can use them. Instead of forcing an interaction, offer the animal and opportunity to interact (e.g. Holding out a hand for a head scratch) and respect their decision of whether they want to or not. Read their body language to identify when they want to interact and when they don't.
- You can think about it like human interactions; some people greet with hugs, others with kisses on the cheeks and others with a short handshake. Just like someone may want to shake hands but would be very uncomfortable with kisses from a stranger, not every dog or cat wants to be tussled, petted or picked up by strangers. If you want to earn an animal's trust, you need to find out what they think is appropriate and respect that, even if that may not be how you want to interact with them
  - A great resource is this article on how your own body language can be interpreted by animals https://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/what-did-you-say-what-your-body-language-says-to-your-pet/

- **The Problem:** Many owners want their dogs to like people and develop a happy, outgoing attitude. However, there are some factors to behaviour (like genetics and deeply learned behaviour) that we cannot change.
  - **Instead:** work on changing what we can and adapting to what we can't. Just because a cat doesn't want to sleep on your lap doesn't mean they don't want other forms of attention like chin rubs or play time. We can train an animal to become as comfortable as they can with certain interactions (and many animals can do very well with this) but ultimately there will be limits and we can only adapt our own expectations and behaviours to these limits.

Not every animal is eager to meet new people and this can be challenging for anyone who loves animals. However, there are many ways that we can try and improve an animals' comfort level when interacting with people. With patience and consistent training, you can make a big improvement in your relationship with a nervous animal. However, if these techniques are unsuccessful or if they are showing aggression or other concerning behaviours, talk to your regular veterinarian. They may recommend a behaviour consult with Dr Cousins for more in-depth behaviour modification. Talk to your regular vet for more information.