Difficult young dogs at the vet – pandemic shut in effect
By Dr. Sally Foote, DVM, CABC-IAABC

Over the past year, veterinary practices have commented on forums about the increase in dogs under the age of two struggling, during veterinary exams. Before the pandemic shut down of 2020, dogs under the age of two would be resistant to handling and veterinary exams if they missed puppy class or other socialization outlets. In general, a young dog who had social interactions, with regular veterinary care did not show anxiety or aggression during handling at the veterinary clinic.

Since the shutdown of 2020, many veterinary clinics have continued the curbside care approach of having the client wait outside, as the staff takes the animal inside for care. The purpose is to minimize contagion of the COVID 19 virus. Families have limited the number of people coming over to the house for picnics or gatherings, and retail stores have limited allowing pets inside for socialization. As the pandemic stay at home orders continued, and social distancing was continuing, clinics were finding puppies raised during this time, were developing into adult dogs who were resisting, or aggressing during routine veterinary care.

I created a survey to veterinary staff focused on the in-clinic exam behavior of dogs two years of age as of December 2021. Dogs at this age, were 8–12-week-old puppies at the start of the stay-at-home orders, and switch to curbside care at the veterinary clinic. Puppies did not have outlets for petting, handling, or touch by unknown people during this time, except during veterinary care. The client was limited in communication with the veterinary staff during exams, due the separation of the animal from the client during exams and care.

The survey:
A ten-question survey, with opportunity to comment was circulated to Facebook, association, and general veterinary groups from November 1 2021 to Jan 5, 2022. Participants could take the survey one time. There was not sponsorship by any industry or group outside of the investigator, Sally J Foote DVM.

Survey Results:
131 respondents

Question 1 – Check all the veterinary care settings that you work in on a regular basis.
96% work in a brick-and-mortar veterinary small animal practice; 8% mobile 3% shelter clinic 3% vaccine clinic

Question 2 What is your degree level? 60% DVM only, 23% certified veterinary technician/licensed veterinary nurse; 2% technician with specialty; 3% DVM with diplomate, 3% practice management/administration.

Question 3 – How would you describe your work interactions with young dogs and clients?
92% responded that they examine all dog patients for all care 1% surgery only and the remaining responses were comments about specialty care or administration.

Question 4 Have you noticed any difference in the level of anxiety/aggression/rowdy behavior of dogs
under two years of age as of December 2021 compared to dogs presented for exams pre-pandemic stay at home and under the age of two? 65% reported dogs pulling away, jumping on the staff, flipping the head when touched, and physically struggling more when handled for care. 46% reported dogs are quicker to snap, nip when feet, ears, mouth, or the body is handled, 37% reported growling, staring or barking more readily at stimuli at the clinic. 15% did not see a difference, and 12% were not sure as they were not clear if the dog’s behavior was overly friendly or lacking manners rather than aggressive or anxious.

Question 5 Has there been any change in bite and near bite incidents at your workplace when examine/handling dogs under two years of age as of December 2021? 31% yes 47% no 15% not sure due to non-reporting but witness an increase.

Question 6 Did your facility use curbside care between March 202 and December 2021? 70% yes, 7% no 10% modified by limiting the clients to one at a time or taking care outdoors. Many comments about using curbside part of the time, then limited client entry or end curbside once vaccination available.

Question 7 Was there a difference in your ability to educate clients about puppy care and behavior during the Stay-at-home orders?

31% no – they took the time to advise and send home resources. 32% could not talk directly but used resources 30% yes, it was difficult to keep up with case load and time demands for puppy education, 3% do not do much puppy behavior education.

Question 8 Have you seen any change in the number or type of puppy and young dog exams at your clinic since March 2020? 60% yes – more puppies! 32% yes – either more pet ownership or more people available to bring pets in for care7% not sure 5% no – saw the same number of puppies as pre pandemic.

Question 9 – What effects of the stay-at-home orders do you feel have influenced puppies raised from March 2020 to Dec 2021? 84% lack of socialization to car rides, people visiting, petting, and missing puppy class increased poor manners and fear of new things 75% over bonding to the client due to work at home increased separation anxiety and other anxieties 25% curbside and lack of time with clients lost our ability to help puppy parents.

Summary:

The results show most general practices are experiencing an increase in young dog handling resistance. Lack of socialization to touch from non-family members and over bonding to the owner are contributors. The lack of non-family members petting, these dogs decrease handling acceptance, resulting in increased handling aggression (1,2). Hyper bonding to the owner can increase resource guarding, resulting in increased growling, staring or body blocking of the veterinary staff when the dog is near the owner (3). This resource guarding will increase growling, barking and other aggressive behaviors when the owner is present with the dog.

Low stress veterinary care techniques, focused on adapting the approach, and touch during handling to decease stress is important for all patients. These young dogs raised during the pandemic shut down, have missed an important development period in their life to accept handling and will be a higher risk
patient for injury during care. Reducing this staff injury risk will require more education in reading body language, clinic care environment management, behavior-based handling techniques, and use pre-exam medications to manage anxiety and aggression. Owners of young dogs will need to be compliant in preparation for a low stress veterinary visit. Clear recording of the handling plan and triggers to anxiety and aggression in the medical record is important for consistent safe veterinary care.

The pandemic of 2020 changed many things in our culture. Many industries and educators are continuing remote options. The hyper bonding effect between young dogs and their owners will continue to be a challenge as people are more home based. As homes and community gatherings open, puppies can now socialize to petting and handling, to prevent handling anxiety. The young dog also called “pandemic puppies” can improve. It will take time, repeated training, and increased staff skill levels for low stress veterinary care. Further studies are needed to monitor the effects of the pandemic shut down on young dog behavior.