



*What if all cats loved
(or at least tolerated)*

VETERINARY VISITS?



And now you wake up from that dream to find this actually can be a reality, at least for some cats—when they start learning young. I have two ideas to share that can benefit both your practice and your clients with new kittens.

Initiate Happy Kitten Visits

We all know how ecstatic cats are when we return from Costco with empty boxes. The problem isn't the carrier itself; it is after all only a box. It's that kittens very quickly learn to associate that box we call a cat carrier with what's about to happen next, which is that horrifying veterinary visit.

But what if the visit isn't horrifying?

Remember, little kittens (up to 15 weeks or so) are also little emotional sponges. If their initial veterinary visits are happy, that positive emotional experience might carry through for the lifetime of the cat. And if the initial visits are happy for the client—the same applies—that the client will think more positively of vet visit for their cats in the future. And as I've written about in this column before, millennials, in particular, are paying close attention to the emotional, as well as physiologic well-being of their pets in relation to veterinary visits.

The idea is for kittens to enjoy positive exposure and experiences at the clinic. What you don't want is a stressed out

kitten stuffed unceremoniously and abruptly into a carrier, followed by a stressful car ride, entering an unfamiliar clinic, being handled by strangers with strange smells, being poked and prodding, and then stuffed back into the scary carrier for a ride home. We have to break this pattern for our patient's well-being.

So, where do you start?

Write out a simple protocol for Happy Kitten Visits, beginning with acclimation to the carrier. (You might also try acclimating older cats to the carrier as well, using the same steps. But we'll focus on kittens here). Clients should leave the cat carrier out 24/7 and periodically drop treats in it. The carrier transforms into an automatic treat dispenser. How can that be bad? Instruct clients to play with the kitten in/around the carrier. Establish a basic comfort level with the carrier.

The next step is having the clients close the carrier and walk around the house a bit. And after letting kitty out, offer a high value reward like wet food or cheese. Being inside the carrier is soon enough associated with something very good. This goes on for a week or so before the Happy Kitten Visit. The idea is to encourage kittens to actually want to be in their carriers. Incidentally, this really works!

On the day of the Happy Kitten Visit, there's that car ride to your clinic—a novel experience for the kitten. Leave treats

inside the carrier, favorite toys, and a familiar smelling towel or blanket. It may also be helpful to pre-emptively spray the carrier with Feliway (analogue of the facial pheromone). Instruct clients to play classical/calming music on the car radio.

The Happy Kitten Visit!

When the client arrives for the Happy Kitten Visit, take them directly to an exam room as quickly as possible. Be aware of busy/scary/noisy waiting rooms, and try not to schedule Happy Kitten Visits during the busiest hours at the clinic. Once in the exam room, place the carrier on the ground and let the kitten come out and explore.

This is also where a veterinary nurse/technician enters into the equation with a new job title: "Kitty Lover." The job of the Kitty Lover is to ensure the Happy Kitten Visit is actually happy.

Before the kitten arrives, of course, ensure the exam room is thoroughly cleaned, and that a Feliway pheromone diffuser is plugged in. Feliway does its job to help the kitten feel more comfortable in the environment. The Kitty Lover's "tough job" includes offering treats to the kitten, engaging the kitten in play, and petting and comforting kitty. Also, the kitty lover

can answer any care or behavior questions, such as “how do I clip those nails?” or “How do I get Spanky to stop jumping on the dining room table?”

At some point it’s a great idea for the veterinarian to stop into the room to

tell the client, “This is the cutest kitten I’ve seen in my career.” Petting the kitty is arguably de-stressing for any busy professional, and briefly exchange pleasantries with the client.

This entire Happy Kitten Visit should take only 10 to 15 minutes. There’s lots of data on the importance of handling kittens by various people and how acclimation to anything at this young age is meaningful. This is well worth the 10-minute investment of scheduling an exam room. And, if the client is willing, two Happy Kitten Visits are better than one. Aside from the advantage of the kitten creating a positive association with the carrier and

veterinary visit, this is a great way to further bond the practice and a technician/nurse with the client. Positive association with the cat carrier should continue at home.

Of course, soon after the first Happy Kitten Visit an appointment must be made for a physical exam. The Happy Kitten Visit, I believe, should be at no cost. In addition, Cat Friendly Practices and the Fear Free initiative offer

lots of tools for you and also for your clients to deal with fearful cats—but how great would it be if the cat weren’t fearful in the first place!

There’s virtually no financial investment on the part of the clinic in offering Happy Kitten Visits; and the payoff might lead to a cat client seeing you for a lifetime. This means wellness and preventative care visits will also increase, and you’ll see the client more often, rather than only when something is desperately wrong with their cat. When this shift happens—everyone benefits!

Kitten Socialization Classes

The second idea I’d like to share is Kitten Socialization Classes. These visits are far more instructive than Happy Kitten Visits. Very gradually, this idea, which began in Australia, is catching on in the U.S. In my next column, I’ll offer a primer on how to create Kitten Socialization Classes, explain advantages to partnering with an animal shelter, and present bullet points for the curriculum. I’ll also explain why I am convinced Kitten Socializations Classes can save lives!

See you next issue! 

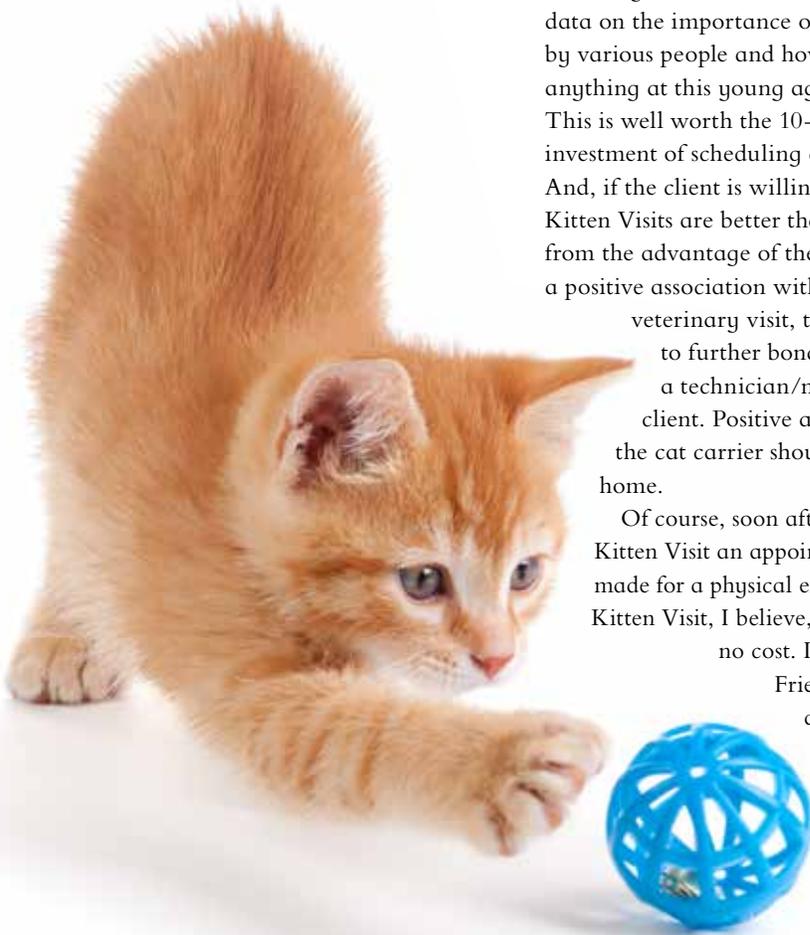


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ABOUT STEVE DALE

Steve Dale, CABC (certified animal behavior consultant) is co-editor of *Decoding Your Dog* (authored by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists) and is a contributor to many veterinary books including *The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management* (edited by Dr. Susan Little) and *Treatment and Care of the Geriatric Veterinary Patient* (edited by Dr. Mary Gardner and Dr. Dani McVety). He’s a columnist for *Veterinary Practice News* and *Pet Vet Magazine*, and a contributing editor at *CATSTER*. He is host of two national radio shows, and is heard on WGN radio, Chicago. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Winn Feline Foundation and Human Animal Bond Association. And he speaks at conferences around the world. Among his many honors the AVMA Humane Award and he’s in the Dog Writer’s Association Hall of Fame. And is a frequent speaker at conferences around the world. His blog is www.stevedale.tv.

