

In our last newsletter we shared how we strive to set your pet up for successful in-home visits through an initial consultation or walk-along with our team member who will be the caregiver. This month we want to share more insights in how to make these consultations successful and how to navigate potential obstacles. For simplicity, we reference dogs for most of the examples, but the same strategies apply to all animals.

It is common for our team to encounter nervous dogs, especially when meeting them for the first time. Nervousness in dogs can be caused by various factors, including new surroundings, unfamiliar faces, or a change in routine. However, with the right approach, you can help your pet sitter ease your dog's anxiety and create a positive experience for both your pet and the pet sitter.

Below are some tips to help you prepare your dog for their first meeting with a pet sitter.

It's normally best to introduce your dog to the pet sitter in a familiar environment. To help your dog feel more at ease, introduce them to the pet sitter in a place inside your home where they feel most comfortable. During the initial consultation, we want to first give your pet time to get to know our team member and we also want to keep things as similar as possible for when the visits will occur. For example, if your pet is normally in a family room when you aren't home, that is a good place to meet our team member. We want the introduction to be a positive experience, lay the groundwork for a long relationship between your dog and our team member, and avoid anything that could trigger their anxiety.

We train our team to look to the animal for their consent before approaching. During the consultation, it's okay if your pet doesn't run up to say "hi" immediately. Allow your dog to approach the pet sitter in their own time and at their own pace. Don't try to force the interaction or feel pressure to rush this greeting along. During the consult, we will review the care instructions you submitted to our office team. We want to make sure your dog accepts our team member by the end of the visit. If not, it adds risk to what might happen when you aren't home.

The goal is to ensure our team member can safely enter your home and get your dog out for a walk. Sometimes it may be necessary to try different strategies, such as moving from the initial room to a different room, leashing up your dog and going for a walk with our team member, or possibly scheduling a second visit after doing what we can to make this first one a positive experience for your dog. It is not uncommon to schedule multiple walk-alongs in an effort to give your dog more time to adjust and

accept a new person entering the home, especially if your dog is not familiar with having new people caring for them in your absence.

You can prepare for the consult by having supplies ready and reward your dog as they are meeting a new person. Pairing treats and rewards with the association of meeting new people is an effective way to use positive reinforcement to encourage happy feelings when being exposed to something different. Using treats that your dog considers high-value is essential, such as training treats, hotdogs, lunch meats, or cheese; we do not recommend the standard dry biscuit. By cutting the treats small, your dog can receive a regular stream of rewards without eating too much. If your dog isn't food motivated, have their favorite toy ready. As your dog gets comfortable and approaches our team member, it's good to praise and reward your dog. Sometimes it takes patience. We train our team to stay low, look small, and ignore your dog until the dog decides they want to approach our team member.

It is best to complete the registration packet in advance so that our team can review the notes with you at the in-person visit. Sharing information about your dog's personality and routine with the pet sitter can help the pet sitter adjust their care to match your dog, ultimately helping to establish a bond with your dog. If your dog is sensitive to strangers, passing along this information before the meeting is a good idea, so your pet sitter can prepare accordingly. Examples might include: the best way to approach your dog, their favorite scratching spot, whether a hat, mask, or other clothing item creates stress, their favorite toy, and how you get your dog to engage with you. Tips like this are helpful so we know how best to approach the visits. Our team loves animals and wants to get to know your pet personally. They can then share that information with other team members.

Be patient during the initial consultation. It's okay for your dog to be hesitant. Dogs can sense when their family is anxious, which can make them more nervous. There is no need to rush these interactions. We have encountered situations where a dog responds differently when their family member is in the same room versus when they aren't home. We will work with you to develop a plan to help your dog adjust to ensure our team members can visit your dog in a safe and positive manner.

For some animals, meeting a new pet sitter can be an anxious experience. By following these tips, you can help your dog feel more comfortable and make the introduction a positive experience for everyone involved. Our pet sitters are experienced professionals

who have a genuine love for animals, understand some of the nuances that encompass nervous dogs, and will work with you to ensure your pet's well-being.

Next month we will address in more detail what we can do if your pet still isn't comfortable, even after our initial consult.