



Nanette Walker Smith, MEd, RVT, CVT, LVT
 Fear FreeSM Certified Professional
n_w_smith_24@outlook.com * 719-464-7466



Environmental and Behavioral Enrichment for Canines

<https://www.facebook.com/Theophilus5/videos/10150207831982167/>

On an average day, how many dogs do you see in practice exhibiting signs of Fear, Anxiety, or Stress (FAS)?

What if I told you, you might be UNDER estimating that number?

Let's start with an overview of what FAS includes. As we review, reflect on your patients, your own pets, and others you see. Are they really happy to see you? Or are they exhibiting fear, anxiousness, or stress?

Fear FreeSM evaluations use a 5 point FAS Scale to help easily identify where a pet is at any given time with its stressor level. Note that this number can change in a second, up or down, and can be affected by a myriad of things. It is our job to keep this FAS number as LOW as possible for the benefit of the pet's well-being (our number one purpose in our career) and for our safety as well! (Developed by Kenneth Martin, DVM, DACVB and Debbie Martin, LVTS, VTS (Behavior), 2017)

Most pets are food, toy, or interaction oriented so the FAS Scale uses indication to accept treats/food /reinforcement as a means to help identify the FAS level and is color coded in a stop light fashion to help quickly identify changes in levels.

0	Relaxed; readily accepts treats, toys, attention	No signs of FAS; relaxed body language, social interaction with team
1	Mild FAS; readily accepts treats, toys, attention	Shows 1-2 mild signs of FAS – i.e. lip licking, avoiding eye contact, head turning, paw lift, partially dilated pupils, panting with relaxed commissures LESS THAN 4 times/minute. Interested in interaction.
2	Moderate FAS; usually will, but may not accept treats, toys, attention	Shows 1-2 moderate signs of FAS – i.e. ears slightly back/side, tail down, furrowed brow, slow movements, overt attention seeking, tight mouth pant (dog) LESS THAN 4 times/minute. Still social with team.
3	Moderate FAS; fidgeting, difficulty settling, 'nervous' attention	Shows 2 or more moderate signs of FAS MORE than 4 times/minute. May refuse reinforcement/treats or take them roughly. Hesitation to avoidance of team.
4	Fight/Freeze/Flight responses; little to no interest in treats, toys, or attention	Severe FAS signs WITHOUT aggression – i.e. immobility, escape, dilated pupils, panting (dog), increased RR, trembling, tense/closed mouth, ears back, tail tuck or thrashing (cat). Likely will not accept reinforcement and may exhibit active avoidance (moving away).
5	Heightened Fight/Freeze/Flight responses; no interest in treats, toys, or attention	Severe FAS WITH aggression – i.e. growling, lunging, barking, snarling, snapping, and intolerant of procedures.

FAS Stoplight Scale and examples can be purchased through <https://fearfreepets.com/resources/fear-free-store/>

Ideally, this Scale is addressed multiple times throughout the pet's visit from the arrival to the hospital, entrance, exam room, treatment area, kennel area, procedures, pre/post op, and release. All of this is



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recorded in an Emotional Medical Record so the team can learn for future visits to help keep those FAS scores low. Educating the pet parent to help prepare for the visit (it does start at home) and to working with the front desk Customer Service Representative (CSR) with scheduling to ensure the best possible visit for everyone involved.

A great resource for behavior and body language is behavior specialist Dr. Lisa Radosta's website <https://www.flvetbehavior.com/> as well as her book, **From Fearful to Fear Free**. The book as well as the Fear FreeSM resources at <https://fearfreepets.com/veterinary-professionals/> have great images and discussions of the representations of body language that are often mistaken as 'craving affection' or 'rub my tummy' when it's actually FAS! Specifically, think of that lapping little dog who always wants kisses, but actually is snapping at the end?

We've very briefly covered FAS. How can we AVOID it? Or, at least minimize it to help make our patient's visit more enjoyable, even if it's going to include some parts that aren't necessarily happy (vaccination, radiographs for an injury, dental, surgery, etc.) How can we help our pet parent's understand THEY play a HUGE part in their pet's successful visit? Minimizing FAS not only helps the pet and pet parent, but significantly decreases chances of worker's compensation issues (bites, back problems, stress, other injuries) and job dissatisfaction. The levels of FAS are significantly affected by a pet's feeling of safety/security, its' sense of place.

Liz Bales, VMD, founder of FEED, Co (Feline Environmental Enrichment Design, Co.) makes a good point with the statement: "What are you doing for environmental enrichment?" Whether this question is asked of the pet parent or of the veterinary practice, stop and think about this for a moment. What is environmental enrichment and why is it important?

The definition of environment includes the 5 'W's':

- WHERE-ever your patient is: at home, in the car, between the car and veterinary office, in the exam room, in the park, etc.
- WHO is in that patient's space at that moment?
- WHAT else is going on in that patient's space at that moment?
- WHEN the situation is occurring in that patient's day (early, mid, late; before/after food)
- WHY is the patient in that space at that moment – its circumstance? Fun visit, vaccination, injury, etc.

Environmental Enrichment is defined as "modification of the physical environment of animals, especially those in captivity, for the purpose of meeting behavioral needs and improving well-being." (2015 NAL Glossary by the United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library)

This means changing the physical environment to meet behavioral needs of the animal to improve the animal's well-being. This does not take into account an animal that has an issue that is well outside of a normal response to an enrichment that will affect a behavioral response we hope to see. For example, a brain tumor or severe metabolic disorder that affects a body's normal functions. This definition also does not address the fact that our pet patient's sensory perception is much more sensitive to environmental stimuli than we are. Some species and even breeds are more sensitive in some areas than others. For example, Bloodhounds vs. Pugs and their sensitivity to smell, German Shepherds vs. Cocker Spaniels for sound, etc. We cannot assume our pet patients will react to environmental stimuli



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the way we will. For example, love of loud music or noise, lots of kids running around, heavy perfume, cleaner smells, etc. What is their normal? Picture the Guinea pig in a kindergarten classroom!

Use of enrichment can be as simple as lavender scent (nontoxic/medical, soothing smell) very lightly sprayed in corners of exam rooms every few hours, a trail of treats (food/game) to entice a dog onto a scale, or frozen broth in a Dixie cup to entice a dog to lick during a vaccination injection as a means to distract (action) and comfort (food). The Fear FreeSM certification series has multiple examples, videos, blogs, and a Facebook group that continues to add to all of the creative ways to utilize enrichment in practice.

Behaviorally, enrichment begins at home.

Dogs that destroy, mark (urinate or defecate inappropriately in the home), bark, whine, scratch, bite, may be over protective or unpredictable, etc. usually have a reason they are acting that way. WARNING: It's usually not a black and white answer. If you are lucky enough to plan a veterinary visit for issues include the following steps. If you are already involved with a patient, start here and plan accordingly! First and foremost, have owners create a journal. What is the complaint or issue? What behavior do they want to change? Have the owner record the 5 W's that are occurring when the specific behavior is happening. Encourage the owners to consider if they notice a pattern or trend developing. Additionally, have the owner complete a Pre-Visit Client Questionnaire (<https://fearfreepets.com/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2018/08/Fillable-Previsit-Client-Questionnaire.pdf>). The Customer Service Representative (CSR) can also further accentuate the visit for new clients by calling to schedule or prior to the scheduled visit with this questionnaire: <https://fearfreepets.com/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2017/07/Pre-visit-CSR-FAS-Phone-Interview.pdf>.

Next, a full medical examination is in order. The veterinary staff needs to understand and gently help the client understand this may take time and more than one visit to minimize FAS on the dog. During these visits work on the Emotional Medical Record and start gathering information from the veterinary end and work with the journal the pet owner is keeping. Encourage good note taking and take the time to review those notes. Often examples of possible stressors or fears or anxieties will show up quickly in that journal such as every time a car ride is apparent or a certain person comes over or noises are heard (vacuum, loud music, etc.) Modifying the environment may be as simple as removing an annoying vacuum or the dog from the home during vacuuming. Some dogs will flip out at the mere sight of the vacuum! Whether you want to re-introduce that vacuum back into the home with the dog present is a whole different situation. Commend owners for detailed information. Yes, it's timely to review, be sure to schedule time to review journals and discuss with the owners. Fact gathering and understanding what the owner is willing and able to do in their situation is paramount to success. Each situation will be different – consider it an Individual Enrichment Program (IEP) much like IEP's are for human students for their individual educational programs – tailored for their success.

Puppy Play Times, Doggy Day Care, and Shelters are all 'sharing' enrichment techniques as well. Educate your teams with what is out there. My favorite game is to attend these as an innocent bystander and soak it all in. Don't pass judgement, but watch and learn. Evaluate what you see from the instructors, pet parents, the pets and their responses, and the ease with which they learn and adapt. For many, thinking like a dog is difficult. Understanding the sensory perceptions is even more difficult. "Dogs communicate mainly through the use of body language—via nonverbal gestures and movements. While visual acuity of most dogs is poor, 20/75 compared to a human's 20/20 vision, dogs are sensitive to



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small body movements. Movement appeals to the canine visual senses. Dogs take cues from their environment and are often able to “predict” what we are about to do even if we think we have not given any indication. This is because they are perceptive of our body language, even with our absence of movable ears or a tail. (Martin K 2018)” As humans we’ve been raised that ‘more is better’ when in fact in the animal world it’s exactly the opposite. Overload of senses in and of itself can often be the biggest form of stressor to a pet. There is also the acronym K*I*S*S. Keep It Simple Silly! Merely changing which door you go in and out of is often enough of a distraction to change a behavior because suddenly the routine has changed and all bets are off – something else may change too! Face it – we like a change sometimes too, right? Remember too, for some, changing too many doors can cause stress – it’s a fine line – individually tailored.

For dogs, kibble finding adventures, not even special treats, just their regular kibble, but in a different location or at a different time is enrichment. Rewards for proper responses, every time, are a great way to introduce good behavior and a reward system. Clicker Training can be added as well when there are specific behaviors to train for. Substitute treats for a toy for longer gratification or distraction. Be sure to choose toys appropriate for the size and mouth of the dog. Also watch carefully how the dog reacts and utilizes the toy. If it’s a string based toy – one that shreds easily into string like features – and the dog annihilates it in an hour or less, stay away from those toys! This may be enjoyment for the dog; however, disaster for anything in the home that can easily be shredded. This also goes for toys with stuffing. Rawhide, bones, antlers, etc. aren’t highly recommended by veterinary dentists and internists due to the tooth damage, but again, warrant very careful discussion with pet parents of appropriate goodies. Some dogs love cat toys. My Pyrenes loves catnip mice. She carries them around in her mouth very gently; doesn’t play with toys otherwise at all! Kong toys come in all sizes and small amounts of cheese in a can, cream cheese, peanut butter, or treat bits stuffed in them can work wonders for distraction. Puzzle toys can ramp up the search factor and have even replaced feeding bowls in some households! (Great for slowing down that chowhound.) www.Chewy.com has a myriad of examples from balls to interactive trays to plush toys, etc. The Labrador Site: <https://www.thelabradorsite.com/dog-puzzle-toys/> is another good resource and recommended by several on the Fear FreeSM Facebook Group. Remember homemade toys can be crafted as well. They just need to be secure and checked so parts aren’t ingested or splinter or pinch.

Try the “Find It” Game for Dogs and “Human and Puppy Play” handouts and then add your own versions!

Often behaviors seen at home, in public, or even in a shelter are similar to what we may see on presentation at the veterinary office. How many of those pets are exhibiting signs of FAS? More than you thought? All of the information and documentation done by pet parents, and veterinary staff can be a win-win in helping change behaviors from dogs that exhibit Fear, Anxiety, and Stress to dogs that are calm, happy, and more at ease in their environment. Animals that are without FAS tend to be healthier and/or will recover from health situations more quickly than those that are also battling with FAS. Working as a team we can affect positive behavior through enrichment and good medicine!



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“Find It” Game for Dogs

Dogs need an outlet for exploratory or searching behavior. If a human-approved outlet for this behavior is not provided, they will likely find one that is less acceptable (digging in the garden, stealing items off the counters, or out of the laundry, etc.) The “find it” game is a great way to provide physical activity and mental stimulation.

Items needed

Numerous small treats (dry dog kibble works well)

A hungry and eager dog

An area free of distractions such as other dogs or cats

The game

1. When first teaching this game, let the dog see the treats being placed about the room.
2. “Hide” the treats in dog-allowed locations (on or near the floor in clear sight initially). Potential locations are on the ledge or the foot of a chair leg or table (not on the table). Avoid locations where human food is placed or any location where the dog is not allowed to explore.
3. Place 10 treats about the room while someone holds the dog or he is behind a barrier watching.
4. Give the cue, “Find it”, just before letting the dog go explore and enjoy the treats.

Repeat this game daily in the house or even in a fenced in backyard. Once the dog understands this game, increase the difficulty level by hiding the treats with him out of sight. Always start the game with the same cue word or phrase.

If the dog knows a stay cue, have him perform a sit or down stay while the treats are placed around the room. Reinforce and release him to find and eat the treats.



Human and Puppy Play

Dogs and people are social creatures. Engaging in activities that are enjoyed together will enhance the relationship between you and your dog. These activities may be in the form of interactive playing, training, or walking. Training should be fun for the dog and incorporate play.

One type of human-dog play is tug. Tug can be an interactive, energetic, and appropriate game to play with your dog. Teaching a dog to enjoy playing tug with you allows the tug to become a useful tool for motivation and reward. When taught correctly, it allows you to contain and control the dog's arousal. Tug is a suitable outlet for play mouthing/biting and it teaches the dog how to play appropriately with people.

The Tug Game

1. You should initiate and end the game. Have special toys that are used for playing tug that are kept out of the reach of the dog until play time.
2. Give the verbal cue "take it" and present the tug toy. Move the tug toy slightly back and forth to foster interest or chase. Keep the toy at a level that does not require the dog to leap high in the air to try to get the toy. Generally, at the dog's head height or below is a good rule of thumb.
3. When the dog has the toy in his mouth, engage him in a gentle game of tug. Verbally reward his interest in the tug. Motion should be smooth gentle pulls side to side or forward (toward you). Avoid up and down or jerky movements as they can cause injury to the dog. With young dogs, just a soft tug and release will do. For example, you want to tug--- tug--- tug, not TUUUUUUGGGGGG-TUUUUUUGGGGGG. Use caution when a puppy is teething because his mouth will be sensitive.
4. It is OK for the dog to "win" the toy. Sometimes release the toy and back away from the dog while encouraging him to bring the toy back to you.
5. To teach the release of the tug toy on cue: Freeze (stop tugging and any toy movement). Give the verbal cue "drop it" and prompt it with a treat directly under your dog's nose. Reward with the treat for dropping the toy. A marker such as a click or other event marker could be used to mark the precise moment of the release. Pick up the toy.
6. Add the cue, "sit" or "down", and reward the behavior with "take it" and presentation of the tug toy. This helps to control the puppy's arousal while working on manners training at the same time.
7. Repeat the above steps. Eventually, you will delay your presentation of the treat after giving the "drop it" cue.
8. When the game is over, let the dog know by saying something such as, "all done," and engaging him in an independent activity such as searching for treats or playing with another toy independent of you. The tug toy should be placed away and out of sight.

There are a variety of ways to play tug with dogs. Each dog will have individual preferences for the type of toys they play with, how much tugging they like, and how engaged the person is with the play. Some dogs prefer to retrieve the toy and bring it to you without the tug. Retrieving is another form of appropriate play between people and dogs. It too requires monitoring and controlling the arousal level during the



game. Regardless of individual preferences in play the welfare and safety of the dog and person should be at the forefront.

Helpful hints:

- Use a long tug toy to keep the dog at a distance from your hands and allow you to stand upright while playing.
- Have two identical tug toys. When the dog releases one, pull the other one out and engage him in play.
- The dog may be on leash for control when teaching tug.
- A rope or line attached to the tug is sometimes helpful.

Side note:

Teaching a dog to play tug will not make him aggressive. Tug can be a physical and mental outlet for energetic dogs. However, do not play tug with dogs that guard objects and/or display aggression with toys. It is not recommended for children to play tug with dogs because the excitement level may be more difficult to control. This should be an adult only game with your dog. There is a risk of accidentally being bitten when playing tug with a dog.