



Q & A Session for the Veterinary team – 10th December 2020 Merry Covid Christmas – Helping pets cope with Christmas in a pandemic year

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(Please note some of the questions have been re-worded to summarise them and additions have been made to a few of the answers. Where it was felt inappropriate or difficult to answer particular questions in an open forum, the questioners have been contacted individually and offered relevant help and advice.)

Q. How would you deal with introducing a guest's new puppy or dog to your own dog?

A. Try to meet away from your home and walk the dogs parallel to each other but a distance apart so they can have a good sniff and get used to each other without the pressure of a face-to-face meeting. Judge by your dog's usual reaction to other dogs and the body language of the guest's dog if it's appropriate to allow them off lead together somewhere where they can run around and greet each other without the pressure of the lead. In the home you could use baby gates or dog gates to keep them separate while allowing them to see each other when you can't directly supervise. If the dogs don't get on well, where the house layout allows, you can have the main party in one room with each dog in a separate room adjoining the main room, with baby gates in the doorways of both.

If it's a dog that doesn't get on well with other dogs, may find Xmas generally too pressuring, or it's a cat, if the pet suffers from anxiety/pre-existing behavioural or health conditions, etc., they don't have to meet or be aware of each other - simply time-share space, resources and attention, and keep them apart. Also, send the puppy owner preparation and management advice, and also expectation of house rules and what can/can't happen.

Q. What about if your dog is lead reactive?

A. You could arrange to take them somewhere secure where they can meet with a fence between them to allow an off lead safe meeting. Depending on how relaxed they are with this, and again taking into account your dog's usual behaviour around other dogs, you could then let them in together, or elect to keep them apart in the house. As above - they don't have to meet or be aware of each other.

Q. How should you deal with relatives who really want to cuddle your dog?

A. It's a good idea to manage your relatives' expectations in advance. You could write a short information sheet detailing how you are going to manage your pets during their visit and how they are going to be allowed to interact with them – and explain the welfare reasons for this, +/- have a short, clear door sign - saves getting into awkward conversations! If you have arranged a safe area for your pets, you can always lock the door to their room and hide the key!

Q. What should you do if your dogs steals a mince pie or some chocolate?

A. It pays to be prepared and have some high value treats readily available for this eventuality. Engage the dog (or cat) with the high value, delicious treat in advance, then lead them away, use

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a scatter bomb or a treat trail - only then should the stolen item be removed, gently and positively. You should not try to grab the item off your dog as this is likely to encourage them to eat it really quickly (and probably the wrapper too!). It also risks them developing guarding behaviour in future. It's important not to look too panicky or attentive as soon as you notice what they have taken, and keep your body language relaxed as you throw down some of the treats and pretend to pick them up/eat them yourself. This will hopefully make them appear more exciting and rewarding than the item the dog has stolen.

If all fails and they do manage to eat a dangerous amount of chocolate (which can be easily calculated) or any grapes/raisins etc, a speedy trip to the vets is required so that vomiting can be induced to prevent them absorbing the toxins. Prevention is key! It's worth training all dogs to swap or drop things so that you're always prepared if they do get hold of something potentially dangerous. You can do this by periodically dropping some high value treats (when the dog hasn't taken anything) and saying either 'swap' or 'drop' so that they learn that these words predict something tasty is going to appear. You can then use this cue when they have taken something - they are very likely to leave this in favour of the treats unless you give more value to the item by your attention! Obviously, it's important to use something very high value for this training. Be sure to hire an appropriately accredited trainer to work with for proactive training, or a CCAB for problems with established food-related aggression, anxiety, guarding problems - link to ABTC.

Q. What should you do if your dog is scared by Crackers?

A. The simplest thing if you have a sound sensitive pet is not to have any crackers, but if the family really want them you can compromise and a) keep the crackers and pull the bangers out; or b) only put the crackers out when the pet is safely out of earshot. (but there is always the risk that a friend or relative will not realise the issue and pull a cracker before you're ready). For pets who are not sound sensitive, you could be prepared with some tasty treats and have the animals in a separate room when the crackers are pulled – each time they hear one you can scatter the treats on the floor - so they develop a positive association with the sound to help prevent them becoming fearful in the future. For pets with pre-established anxiety, if triggers cannot be avoided, and they cannot use their behaviour to cope, event anxiolytics may be needed.

Q. Would you consider anxiolytic medications to help animals over Christmas?

A. Yes, if you or your clients have very anxious dogs, for whom Christmas is going to be particularly stressful, it's worth discussing a short acting anxiolytic. Be proactive, rather than reactive, and give the pet the benefit of the doubt, rather than waiting and seeing. Later, be sure to work with a CCAB to help you longer term. The same criteria apply: if triggers cannot be avoided, and the pet cannot use their behaviour to cope, if they have pre-existing behavioural concerns, pain, etc. Medications would go hand-in-hand with environmental optimisation, pre-planning, safe spaces, being the pet's advocate, meeting their needs, and so on - they should not be a "get out of jail free" solution, negating the need to protect the pet and set them up for confidence and success where possible.