





Accommodating Clients With Disabilities

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The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, globally, more than 1 billion people experience a disability.¹ Given that this is a significant percentage of the population, veterinary practices must ensure necessary accommodations are available for clients with disabilities.

Disability is a term that encompasses all impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. “Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers,” the WHO states.¹

Environmental and social barriers often exist in a veterinary practice and it is essential to take steps to ensure all clients receive the same comfort and accommodation, regardless of ability. The way clients are treated at the practice can directly affect their understanding, compliance, and overall satisfaction with their pet’s care.

Reasonable Accommodations

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires “reasonable accommodations” be made for all people with emotional, physical, and mental disabilities.² Most practices are currently in compliance with building code structures required for accessibility, but much more can be done to ensure all clients feel comfortable and safe during their visits.

Make reasonable accommodations part of the practice culture with appropriate terminology, etiquette, communication of instructions, and appointment accommodations, whenever feasible.

The Client Experience

Understand what the client experiences at your practice:

- Move through the facility as if you were a client. Can you move easily through the rooms without any tripping or falling hazards? Is the lighting adequate?
- Consider what the experience would be like for someone with a visual or physical impairment, or an emotional, mental, or sensory disability? Could he or she maneuver easily?
- Sit in an examination room for 10 minutes, look around the room, and listen. Is there something to look at? Is it noisy? How is the room temperature?
- Sit in the client’s chair. Is it comfortable? Check the height of the seating—many practices have all low seating, which can be challenging or inaccessible for some clients (eg, the elderly, those with hip replacements).

These elements affect the client experience for all clients, not only those with disabilities.

Appropriate Terminology

Using terminology that does not offend is an essential aspect of good social skills and is important when addressing clients with disabilities. Note the reference to *clients with disabilities*, not *disabled clients*. Terminology that avoids labels can help prevent miscommunication and hurt feelings and can build social empathy. Ensure you are always putting the person before the disability (eg, say, *person who uses a wheelchair* instead of *handicapped person*, *person on the autistic spectrum* instead of *autistic person*).

When referring to those without a disability, use terms such as a person *without disabilities*. Do not use “normal person.” Imagine being a person with a disability and hearing others being referred to as “normal.” A person can easily overlook common underlying meanings even when he or she does not intend to be unkind, but those with disabilities may feel such statements are unsympathetic.

General Etiquette

The United Spinal Association has a free, downloadable resource with etiquette tips for interacting with people with disabilities. (See **Resource**, page 32.)

The association’s do’s and don’ts include:

- Do ask someone for permission before giving assistance or making physical contact.
- Do respect personal space and recognize medical equipment as part of a person’s space.
- Do not judge those who request special accommodations, because many disabilities are invisible.

Practice Accommodations

Clients with disabilities can be accommodated in many ways, but here are a few basic steps that will ensure clients feel safe and comfortable and their needs are met when they visit the practice.

- **Provide tables for cat carriers and hands-free resources for dog owners**

Place small tables beside chairs so cat carriers can be placed safely on the table rather than on the floor, where they can become tripping hazards and where some clients may have difficulty setting them down or picking them up. Some great ways to provide a hands-free checkout for clients include carabiners, commercial leash holding devices that can be anchored to the desk, small boarding cages at the front desk, or even a dedicated team member who can act as a concierge for clients and help with check-in and check-out.

- **Be prepared for emergencies**

Train team members in human CPR, have an AED on the premises, and keep emergency contacts for clients. Ensure the practice's street numbers and signs can be seen clearly by a vehicle responding to a 911 call. Remind team members to remain aware of their surroundings and ensure any safety hazards are addressed.

- **Record special requests**

Use practice software to make notations in client records and to remind team members of client accommodation requests or important information regarding client or patient interactions.

- **Change appointment scheduling**

Consider diversifying the schedule and making appointments during quiet times (eg, lunchtime, after normal closing time, after morning surgeries) to ensure less noise and distraction. Also, consider making extended examination appointments if clients need more time. The extra time taken with clients who need it will be invaluable in creating a bond between the practice and the client.

- **Give clients choices**

Some clients with disabilities may prefer to wait in the waiting room or an examination room. Some may prefer to remain outside or in their car until

their appointment time. Create a practice culture of flexibility and understanding.

- **Talk openly**

Talk with clients openly about their needs whenever possible. It is illegal to ask someone, client or team member, if they have a disability or for a specific diagnosis if/when they request reasonable accommodations,³ but clients may disclose this information voluntarily. Asking questions such as, *How can we make your visit more comfortable?*, *Do you have any accommodation requests for your visits to our practice?*, or *Is there any other important information you feel we should know?* on new client forms gives clients the opportunity to disclose their preferences or needs.

Client Visits

Clients who have appointments should always be seen on time, but understanding that many clients with disabilities may be late because they cannot drive themselves to the practice, or they have inflexible schedules for medication or physical therapy, is also important. Some individuals may suffer mental or emotional distress while at the practice; be aware of practice elements that affect the client experience. (See **The Client Experience**.)

Terminology that avoids labels can help prevent miscommunication and hurt feelings and can build social empathy. Ensure you are always putting the person before the disability.

Accommodate clients by providing educational materials and important instructions that take learning differences into account. Everyone learns differently, whether or not they have a disability. There are 7 types of learning styles (ie, visual, physical, aural, verbal, logical, social, solitary³) unrelated to ability or intelligence. Providing clients with multiple means of receiving information ensures the practice will appeal to people with any learning style. Clients can perceive the value of the information, and in turn, the value of their visit.

Resource


- *Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities*. Kew Gardens, NY: United Spinal Association; 2015. unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf

TAKE ACTION

- 1 Always accommodate the needs of clients with disabilities; taking steps to better serve these clients can result in better service for all clients.
- 2 Ensure the practice team is familiar with the correct terminology (ie, these clients *have a disability*; they are not *disabled*).
- 3 Provide educational materials that appeal to every kind of learning style; again, accommodating a client with a disability means helping all clients.

Extra accommodations may seem time-consuming but, in the long run, time will be saved because information does not have to be repeated. Increased client satisfaction and compliance will probably result because clients are more likely to understand information they are given when communication is tailored to their needs. Satisfied clients lead to an improved bottom line.

Conclusion

Understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of every client is vital. Creating an environment in which every client feels safe and respected, whether or not he or she has a disability, is essential for a positive practice culture and business success. 

References

1. Disability. World Health Organization. <http://www.who.int/disabilities/en>. Updated 2018. Accessed March 2018.
2. Information and Technical Assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. Americans with Disabilities Act. United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm. Published 2012. Accessed April 2018.
3. Ferriman J. 7 major learning styles—which one are you? Learn Dash. <https://www.learndash.com/7-major-learning-styles-which-one-is-you>. Published May 17, 2013. Accessed March 2018.



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FUN FACT: When Beckie is not working, she loves spending time with her husband and their fur-family in Southport, North Carolina.