

Highlights of

The Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, Second Edition (2022)



3. Animal Handling

3.1 General

Safe and humane handling is an essential part of supporting animal well-being. Handling must be humane and appropriate for the individual animal and situation. This requires ongoing observation and assessment of behavior with adjustments to the animal's handling plan as needed; appropriate choice and management of environment; sufficient number of trained personnel; and suitable equipment readily available and in good working condition. Potential stressors should be minimized. High-value treats and toys can engage, distract, and reward animals before, during, and immediately after handling. When needed, medication should be used to minimize fear, anxiety, and stress and enhance safety during handling.

3.2 Restraint

Resistance to handling is almost always the result of fear or anxiety. Improper or forceful use of restraint techniques and equipment can escalate a high stress situation, increasing the likelihood of animal or human injury. The minimal amount of physical restraint needed to accomplish necessary animal care must be used.

Forceful restraint methods include scruffing cats or pinning dogs to the ground. These methods must not be used, except in extraordinary circumstances such as situations in which a human or animal is in immediate danger, and other options are not possible. For example, a short period of forceful restraint may be required for an animal that needs to be captured and removed from an unsafe environment. Techniques that rely on dominance theory, such as alpha rolls, are inhumane.

Alternatives to forceful restraint include distraction with food or toys, positive reinforcement, use of towels, blocking visual stimuli, sedation, and proper use of humane handling equipment. Selecting a quiet environment, preparing all necessary materials in advance, and involving a person the animal has a bond with can help minimize fear, anxiety, and stress and reduce the restraint required. If repeated handling is required, training the animal to allow common tasks or to cooperate with handling equipment such as the use of a muzzle is a valuable strategy. Use of sedatives or behavior medications can be the most humane and effective option for frightened, fractious, or feral animals for the delivery of necessary care.

Handling must minimize the risk of escape. Attention to security of enclosures and carriers, building and vehicle exit points, and minimizing fearful stimuli are important during daily care and when moving animals inside and outside the facility.

3.3 Handling equipment

Using humane handling equipment minimizes animal stress during necessary procedures and daily care, prevents escape, and promotes animal and human safety. For example, rather than carrying a cat in their arms, personnel can transport cats through the shelter in carriers. A variety of humane equipment that facilitates animal handling with minimal or no hands-on contact must be available. Handling equipment also has the potential to increase fear or injury if used in a forceful manner or not maintained in good working order.

Control poles must only be used when alternatives for handling dogs are insufficient to protect human safety. To prevent the need for daily removal of dogs that are not deemed safe to walk on a leash, double compartment housing is recommended. It is unacceptable to use control poles on cats or small dogs. Any restraint method, including control poles, cat tongs, or slip-leads, that causes significant compression of the neck or thorax can cause substantial or life-threatening injury and profound emotional trauma in cats. Animals for whom handling equipment is necessary for long-term safe handling should receive positive reinforcement training to minimize fear, anxiety, and distress during its use.

Aggressive behavior between dogs can occur unexpectedly. Shelters must have written protocols and readily accessible equipment for breaking up dog fights to prevent human and animal injury. Equipment may include air horns, whistles, citronella spray, blankets, break sticks, panels, and water hoses (see Behavior).

3.4 Handling feral cats

Specific handling procedures for feral cats include the use of live traps, cat dens, squeeze cages, trap dividers, purposely designed cage nets, and multi-compartment enclosures. This equipment permits personnel to safely sedate or anesthetize extremely fearful cats with injectable medication, to provide food and sanitation, to transfer cats from one enclosure to another, and to release outside, all without hands-on handling.

*See the full guidelines for references and supporting documents:
<https://jasmcah.org/index.php/jasv/issue/view/2>*