

Help to ensure that owners don't make this bonfire night a night to remember!

The 2020 firework season will pose a huge welfare problem for many pets. Claire Hargrave explains how you can prepare owners of all companion animals for this noisy time of year.

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The firework season of 2020 has the potential to pose a huge welfare problem for the estimated 9.9 million owned dogs and 10.9 million owned cats in the UK, all of whom have an innate motivation for self-preservation. Hence, sudden, loud or novel noises immediately alert these animals to likely danger. Unless they have been thoroughly habituated to such noises, our companion animals will initiate increased attentiveness, arousal and an acute stress response on hearing sounds associated with fireworks. So, how would that habituation be achieved? Habituation is most easily achieved during the early development of the young animal, when it is capable of meeting novel stimuli while in a parasympathetic state of relaxation and consequently it is capable of learning that such stimuli can be ignored as they are irrelevant to their safety. The wider the array of stimuli that the young animal encounters during this period, the greater the level of similarity that future novel encounters will hold to the animal's existing concept of safety and the less likely it is that an animal will experience distress on exposure to the novel stimulus.

In any other year, the owners of kittens and puppies would have been given advice that would have enabled owners to initiate strategies that would have built the resilience associated with thorough habituation, creating robust and emotionally healthy companion animals. But 2020 has been very different. The puppy and kitten breeding business has boomed as families have understood, as never before, the benefits of taking companion animals into their hearts and homes. However, the necessary environmental encounters required to build emotional resilience to a complex and noisy world have been missing. Yet, these animals are about to face their first seasonal exposure to fireworks.

It is not just the emotional welfare of young animals that is in peril this November. Dishabituation, the loss of previous competencies to environmental and social stimuli that have been created through the habituation process, occurs when previous, regular exposure to stimuli is prevented. The resulting distress on re-exposure to stimuli is enhanced when such exposure is sudden and intense. The reduced level of auditory stimulation associated with lockdown will have initiated and enhanced sound sensitivity in many, previously relatively resilient, mature companion animals.

As a consequence of COVID-19, the firework season of 2020 will create unprecedented levels of challenge to domestic pets. As a result, cats and dogs that have previously taken the challenges of the firework season in their stride, and even confident young animals experiencing their first exposure to fireworks, will all be susceptible to intense distress. This is a national pet welfare problem and the veterinary profession should be prepared to be proactive in minimising its effects.

Basic preventative and first aid advice for owners includes:

- Create a safe place — a small, darkened, sound-proof den for a dog placed somewhere that the dog would naturally go when anxious. Cats need to be able to get to an established, small, high position (such as an igloo bed on a shelf). Owners should establish these hiding places before firework events
- Dogs should be taken out to toilet before it becomes dark, and litter trays and water should be provided in the room with a cat's 'safe place'
- No matter how irritating a pet's behaviour may be, never use a raised voice or other punishment
- Protect the pet from firework noises,

keeping the animal indoors as it starts to become dark, close curtains, doors and windows. Mask noises with background sounds from the television or radio

- If the pet solicits it, provide support without paying excessive attention; if the pet is worried by a bang and approaches an owner for support, offer affection without being too effusive. Remain relaxed yet offer play and treats, but do not confuse the pet with out-of-character and over-enthusiastic attempts to entertain it. When the pet has calmed, try to distract it with an easy game or searching for a treat
 - Do not leave the pet alone in the home
 - Pets should be microchipped and preferably wearing a tag in case they escape and bolt from the home
 - If a pet normally lives outdoors, consider bringing it indoors
 - Try to soundproof aviaries and provide small prey animals with plenty of bedding to hide in
 - If a pet has previously shown signs of firework-related distress, chemical support should be provided, e.g. Adaptil (Ceva) and Sileo (Zoetis) for dogs and Feliway (Ceva) for cats
 - Advise owners of new or young dogs and cats to use species-appropriate, security enhancing, pheromone products.
- So, how can the veterinary profession help to ensure that 5th November 2020 is not a night to remember for the companion animal population? During the last few months, veterinary practice staff have developed previously unknown technological competencies and now is the time to use them to effect. All patients will benefit from ensuring that clients are fully aware of the animal welfare risks associated with the firework season of 2020.