Learning Objectives

After completing this module, your basic understanding should include:

• An appreciation of what pets mean in people’s lives.
• How your team plays an integral role in enhancing The Bond.
• That proper pet nutrition may help extend the quality and length of a pet’s life, an important component of “responsible pet ownership.”
Introduction

The human-animal bond, (The Bond)—the intimate, symbiotic relationship created and cultivated between a person and (for our purposes here) a dog or cat, is definitely one of the delights of living. People who are responsible pet owners (responsible pet companions, pet parents, care givers), realize the prominent role pets play in their lives and in the lives of their families. They truly have an “affection connection” with their pet, with most saying that their pet is an integral part of the family. Our role as a veterinary health care team member and advocate for the pet’s best interest, is to facilitate the mutual enjoyment between pets and pet owners, for as long as possible.

Figure 1. The Human-Animal Bond

Figure 2. As a veterinary health care team member, you have the ability to enhance this relationship. One way is through proper pet nutrition.

KEY UNDERSTANDING

One of our main roles in veterinary medicine is to be an advocate for the pet’s best interest.
Expanding The Bond

As you’ve noticed, every module of the Hill’s Veterinary Nutritional Advocate Program starts with “Learning Objectives” as well as a photo of the human-animal bond. These pictures are reminders of why most of us are involved with veterinary medicine—it’s not only to witness the human-animal bond, but also to enhance it. We do so by tapping into our skills, talents and abilities (both intellectual and emotional) and the resources we have available through the practice. As a result, every day we have the opportunity to broaden the human-animal bond into the Family-Pet-Veterinary Team Bond.

Figure 3. The Family-Pet-Veterinary Team Bond.
Expanding The Bond

A person can own a dog or cat for years, and love and care for that animal the best they know how. That, in essence, is the human-animal bond. If that person never brings that animal to a veterinary practice for preventive medicine, the veterinary profession and all involved won’t benefit from that human-animal bond. Even more sadly, the animal and the animal owner won’t benefit by our involvement in helping to ensure that relationship is maximized. Veterinary medicine can add significant value to the health and well-being of pets, and therefore indirectly, pet owners.

In playing an active role in your community, one or more members of your veterinary health care team should ideally be involved in promoting the benefits of veterinary care and your practice’s “connectivity” with The Bond. This can be accomplished, oftentimes in schools or at other social activities, with people who already own a pet as well as with people thinking about pet ownership. This can also be accomplished within your practice, with many of the clients that visit every day. One of the most rewarding functions you can be involved with is helping an “Animal Owner” develop into a “Responsible Pet Owner”. This is the essence of the Family-Pet-Veterinary Team Bond!
Before we address responsible pet ownership directly, let’s look at a few relevant definitions:

**Animal:** Any member of the kingdom Animalia, comprising of multicellular organisms that have a well-defined shape and usually limited growth, can move voluntarily, actively acquire food and digest it internally, and have sensory and nervous systems that allow them to respond rapidly to stimuli.

**Pet:** Any domesticated or tamed animal that is kept as a companion and cared for affectionately.
In looking at both definitions, one can see dramatic differences. A “pet” is “kept as a companion and cared for affectionately,” while “animal” is difficult to picture as a particular creature. While most people tend to use the words “animal” and “pet” interchangeably, considering each dog or cat as a “pet” may influence how you and other members of your health care team interact with clients. It would be helpful to you if you knew a particular client felt as if her dog or cat was indeed a pet to her (and very possibly even thought of as a family member), and not only an animal. People who consider themselves “pet owners” are already, or can become, (with some education and communication on your part) more responsible pet owners.

Proper pet selection (depending on the prospective owner’s lifestyle...) is critical. Help potential clients make the correct decision--a life long, successful one for the chosen pet!
What is “responsible pet ownership?” This would be a good question to pose to your own health care team during a meeting. In developing your list, you’ll probably come up with answers such as:

- Initial pet selection
- Behavior training
- Proper socialization
- Spaying/neutering
- Internal/external parasite control
- Necessary vaccinations
- Grooming
- Regular veterinary visits for preventive care
- Compliant with your veterinarian’s recommendations
- Proper pet nutrition…

Many of your answers to, “What is responsible pet ownership?” will involve veterinary medicine. That is why it is so important to let the people in your community know about your products and services. One big area, that is oftentimes overlooked, or at least taken for granted, is proper pet nutrition. When proactively discussed by you, you’ll be surprised at how many responsible pet owners want competent advice on proper pet nutrition. They just don’t know to ask you, or feel funny doing so! They may think it too basic a question, may be confused by all the ads and commercials about grocery store products, or may even believe they’re already providing the best food they can.

Module I.5, Nutritional Assessment helps you to properly evaluate each pet’s nutritional status, and along with the veterinarian, make a specific, proactive recommendation.
Three Factors

Is nutrition really all that important, especially as it relates to The Bond? To answer that question, let’s reflect upon the following statement:

“Health and longevity are largely influenced by three factors-genetics, environment and nutrition.”

Which of these three do you and other members of your veterinary health care team have the greatest ability to be involved in?

Figure 7. Health and longevity are largely influenced by three factors; Genetics, Environment and Nutrition. YOU have the most influence regarding proper pet nutrition.
Three Factors

Genetics: While veterinarians can correct some abnormalities and defects as a result of a pet’s genetic make up, they are not able to actually alter a pet’s genetics. So, with the first of these three factors; genetics, we cannot do anything but correct what has already occurred genetically, and possibly prevent that particular animal from passing the abnormality on to future generations.

Environment: In most instances in small animal practice, we do not have the opportunity to see where a pet actually lives. We may know the neighborhood or area of the city or town where the client resides, but rarely see where and with whom a pet spends most of its time. Thus, it is difficult for us to influence the pet’s environment other than to make general recommendations. If a pet lives with a family in a certain city, we probably will not be able to convince the family to move to a different state for the pet’s benefit! So, in regards to the pet’s environment, including where it stays during the day, where it sleeps at night, the air it breathes, the sanitary conditions, the amount of activity and socialization it receives, the various stresses it might encounter… we have very little control.

Nutrition: This is one area where the health care team and the pet owners have complete control! That being the case, and along with our ability to be an advocate for the pet’s best interest, we really do have an obligation to the pets and people we serve regarding proper pet nutrition. Responsible pet owners want the best for their pets, and rely on veterinary health care team members to confidently and competently recommend, with conviction, the best nutrition for their pet.
As a responsible veterinary health care team member, you have the ability and obligation to help guide clients regarding one of the three factors that greatly influence health and longevity, and therefore, enhance The Bond. Before you can do this, of course, you need to better understand proper pet nutrition—a big reason you are involved with this VNA program!

Ideally, it is best to start the new pet owner off right, by not only discussing proper pet nutrition, but by supplying them with product you have confidence in. On subsequent visits, you can reemphasize the important role proper nutrition plays in the keeping the pet well. For clients that have been feeding a different product than the one you have more knowledge of and utilize within the practice, discuss the benefits of proper nutrition, for both wellness as the pet ages, and for specific disease conditions. As each pet’s lifestage and lifestyle changes, it will be helpful for you to be able to guide the client to the next, more appropriate food. The pet owner wants the pet to live as long and healthy as possible. You do too, so providing nutritional products you believe in, from a company you can trust is paramount to your credibility as an advocate for the pet’s best interest. Having the responsible pet owner visit your practice for nutritional products multiple times a year, allows you and other members of the team to maintain an open, candid dialogue regarding the pet, and to “bond” more with the client! There is no other product or service you can provide that brings the pet owner into your practice as often. Make the most of these interactions.
Pets are an integral part of our society, with six out of 10 households owning at least one pet. Pets have an amazing ability to help keep people happy, healthy, and living, even through what would otherwise be trying situations. Dr. Marty Becker’s phenomenal book, The Healing Power of Pets—“Harnessing the amazing ability of pets to make and keep people happy and healthy,” (ISBN 0-7868-6808-2), provides substantial data supporting the psychological and physiological benefits of pets to people. Scientific documentation reveals that pets provide a “therapeutic touch,” help lower blood pressure, survive heart attacks, improve the reading ability and empathy of children, ameliorate chronic pain, keep people more active, protect people from loneliness, assist in safe passage for the physically and emotionally challenged, detect seizures before they occur, bring joy to nursing homes, cancer wards and penal institutions... Where else, in our hectic world can we find unconditional, non-judgmental friendship, companionship, and devotion? Oftentimes, that “safe haven” is our pet: a grateful wag of a tail, a soft nuzzle and purr, or just that special look that says, “I’m here for you.”
Summary

“There is a growing recognition that provision of veterinary services in a manner that acknowledges the human-animal bond will lead to better outcomes for veterinary practices and their patients.”
(The Current and Future Market for Veterinarians and Veterinary Medical Services in the United States, Executive Summary. May, 1999).

Being involved in veterinary medicine, you are in a unique position to help not only pets, but also pet owners. By incorporating the notion of the Family-Pet-Veterinary Team Bond into your practice’s approach to products and services, you’ll become an even more beneficial part of your community. Hill’s, through proper pet nutrition, is committed in helping you enhance responsible pet ownership and The Bond, as evidenced by our Mission Statement:

“To help enrich and lengthen the special relationships between people and their pets.”

Are You Ready?

To continue, you will need to complete the quiz for this module. When you are ready, click on the forward arrow below to take you to the quiz.