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About this Packet

This packet is intended to provide both general as well as evaluation-specific information for both Pet Partners prospective/existing handlers and Pet Partners team evaluators. Some sections include reference to which audience may be particularly interested in that material; however, the entire contents are useful to both audiences.

Pig Introduction and Behavior

General Considerations and Introductory Information about the Species at Large

Pot-bellied pigs are becoming more common in animal-assisted activities and therapy, and they can be good visitors. Pot-bellied pigs have been something of a fad in many areas of the country, but better information is becoming available. Handlers are learning humane training methods and are developing respectful relationships with their pigs. As with all animals, no one should test a pig without being familiar with pigs and pig behavior. Additional information can be obtained from 4-H groups, fancier groups, breeding farms, organizations, etc.

Pot-bellied pigs are prey species. Dogs are a natural predator of pigs. Therefore, pigs have instinctive fear of dogs. The handler must also be aware of this relationship between pigs and dogs. Even if the pig does well with other animals, the wrong situation might activate primal fears. Care and respect for this aspect of being a pig must always be present.

Smell is their primary sense; their vision is not keen. Smell is the sense pigs use for protection in the wild. A pot-bellied pig can sense fear and may respond to a person’s fearful body signals. As has been mentioned, pot-bellied pigs are extremely sensitive to scent and can respond aggressively to scents.

Even though a pig's vision is not keen, the way a pig perceives the world will affect the way a pig will test and visit. A pig may refuse to walk on distinctly patterned, highly polished/shiny or red floors because it appears as if it is walking into an abyss.

Pigs are very vocal. They communicate by grunting, squealing and snorting to indicate pleasure, distress, alarm, etc.

Some pigs get aggressive and protective around food. Since food treats, food on the floor, etc. can often be a part of pig visits, one never knows when a pig might feel its food source is being threatened by an unsuspecting client. The pig’s response to having food removed must be tested for as well as how gently a pig can take food. Removing food is a direct challenge and threat to the pig. The pig will probably be unhappy. Some may grunt and squeal and get agitated.

Brown wax in the ears is normal. This wax can look like mites, but should not be mistaken for ear mites, which pigs can get. Both sexes of pot-bellied pigs have tusks. Tusks must be trimmed for visits (trimming is usually done by a veterinarian). Permanent tusk removal is not possible.
Pot-bellied pigs go into heat every 18 - 21 days, and their behavior includes lots of sexual activity. Thus, PBPs must be altered to be acceptable for visiting. Altering reduces or eliminates sexual acting out as well as eliminates female heats.

A Pot-bellied pig should be bathed and groomed prior to visits, and hooves should be trimmed. Skin should be free of external parasites, which may be visible (lice), or may be invisible (mites) or the pig will continually scratch. Pigs are very heat sensitive. Pigs do not sweat, but instead must use water to cool down (wallowing in mud).

**Behavior Considerations**

Pot-bellied pigs can be highly territorial, requiring adequate personal space or they are likely to charge. Good handlers must be observant of what their pig is doing - including spacing - at all times. Pigs can become easily stressed and can emit a scream.

A pig’s size and weight is a consideration. True pot-bellied pigs come in many sizes; only the babies are very small. Adults often get to be very large and heavy. Their body mass (coupled with their slow reaction time) can be problematic in certain circumstances. Heavy or large pigs must be very aware of their size and exceptionally responsive to signals such as move over, get up, turn around, etc.

It is not always easy to know if a pot-bellied pig is feeling good on a given day. A pig has fewer body signals than many other animals.

**Signs of Fear or Stress**

- Mane or hackles up
- Twitches the tail (like a cat), usually on only one side
- Head swipe or side swipe of the head, quickly flinging the head from front to side
- Chomping of the mouth (not teeth grinding). This is a special “click.” Not all clicks are a sign of anger. Chomping of the mouth is usually accompanied by a foamy white discharge from the mouth.
- A long, low grunt vocalization can be a warning of anger (before acting on it).
- Charging. The Pot-bellied pig is not necessarily going to bite. Charging is a warning sign, like a growling dog. If a pig charges, discontinue the test. The pig is showing signs of fear. To help you avoid a charge, the signs of a pig contemplating a charge are:
  - Tense body
  - Pig appears to be thinking
  - Tail is straight
  - Head is down, with eyes looking up

**Signs of Relaxation**

- Sniffs the floor
- Shuts eyes
- Rubs a person’s legs like a cat
Gentle wagging of the tail like a dog (wagging on both sides)
Teeth grinding
Holds snout into the air to see better (the pig is exploring and is relaxed)
Flops on side

Link to Pig Evaluation Overview

The Pet Partners Evaluation Overview - Pigs is a resource developed for handlers to increase understanding of the evaluation exercises. Evaluators are encouraged to review it prior to evaluating a pig.

Pig Supplement to Team Evaluator Policies & Procedures

Evaluators should allow extra time for pig testing. Pot-bellied pigs take extra time to get from Point A to Point B. With that in mind, the whole test area should be calm and conducive to testing, not rushed or pressured. Many evaluators choose to evaluate pigs during the first slot of the day (before other teams will arrive) or at the end of the day (when other teams have already left). This not only provides a calmer environment, but also provides necessary time, especially if at end of day, where there is no concern about making another team wait.
An evaluator who exhibits confidence and a sense of control while evaluating pigs is most likely to find a relaxed, calm animal. A nervous or anxious pig can be cautious and not perform in a manner which is consistent with its character, whether during testing or on a visit.
Pigs will typically visit wearing a harness (not a collar) and leash. As with all animals, pigs must have proper equipment for testing. Pig handlers may also utilize cueing wands as standard equipment. Especially for larger pigs that can no longer be picked up, a wand is a very good mobility tool.
The evaluator should approach pigs from the side initially, and reach under their chin to touch them the first time. Evaluators should not approach from behind or touch on top of the head at first. The evaluator may take time to sit by the pig, giving the pig time to get accustomed.
The evaluator should look to see if tusks are present but does not have to perform a thorough examination of the mouth or put fingers in the pig’s mouth. The evaluator may lift the pig’s lips to check the tusks. The pig does not have to sit but can stand at the handler’s side.
Sit should be one of the first commands learned and should be accomplished without the use of food. Down on command is not required. Stay is required, but may be done with the pig in a standing position.
A pig can be groomed with a soft brush. Pigs are able to walk on shiny surfaces or bare floors, so be sure to include that in your testing (since most facilities are not carpeted).
An advanced-level visiting pig will be taught on cue to lie down and roll over on its side. The pig should lie still for a reasonable amount of time and let the evaluator pet and scratch it all over.

Basic training includes come when called. Come when called is possible with the use of multiple commands. Ample time is required for a response. The handler is allowed to use a pocket-sized shaker can or clicker to call the pig on this exercise.

Pot-bellied pigs should be tested with a neutral dog. Pigs are likely to be in contact with other animals during visits (therapy and service dogs, for example). There is a chance that a pig will charge a dog. Therapy pigs must be taught to be comfortable with all dogs and learn not to charge dogs.

The pig should allow you to pick up its feet, pull on its tail, lift its lips, put fingers in its ears, etc.

Most pot-bellied pigs will not like and will back out of a hug, but some will accept it. This is a personality/aptitude and training issue, not an absolute standard.

At the end of/after the skills test, the evaluator should put a bowl of food down in front of the pig and allow the pig to eat. While the pig is eating, the evaluator should move over the pig and slowly take the food away. This will test the pig’s food protection tendencies. If the pig gets agitated, the handler must be able to quickly get the pig back under control and calm.

Alternatively, evaluators may feed by hand (instead of a bowl) or feed a long treat (like a carrot stick), and feed with fingers or open palm. Look for a gentle mouth. If the evaluator is frightened or the fingers are nipped, the pig should not pass the test.

The evaluator should make sure to test for scent aggression. Apply a scented hand cream or perfume (a food scent is suggested, like apple, peach, lemon, vanilla, etc.) at some point during the evaluation. While evaluators are able to control their scent, clients in visiting settings cannot. Thus, the evaluation must intentionally expose the pig to scents to see if the pig is reactive to that stimulus. Evaluators are to have at least one assistant who is handling the pig wear a perfume (in addition to the evaluator’s natural scent) during the evaluation.

In pig testing, good teamwork between the pig and the handler will be either clearly apparent or clearly lacking. Remember that the evaluator is scoring the handler’s skill and teamwork with the animal as well as the animal’s skill and aptitude. Teams can be scored Not Ready because of the handler as well as the animal.