

Training Plan: Grooming and Medical Handling

Why this is useful for your dog to know: Regular visits to the veterinarian and the groomer are an important part of caring for dogs. During these visits, your dog will be handled by strangers. If your dog learns to feel safe and happy about this handling, there will be a much lower risk that he might get upset by it.

End behavior: The dog accepts and even enjoys being groomed and receiving medical care.

Step 1: Familiarize yourself with your dog's body language, so that you know what indicates that the dog is uncomfortable. Throughout this training, never go beyond the dog's threshold. If at any point, he shows signals of stress or anxiety (e.g., lip licking, whale eye, pursed lips, yawning), back up to a previous step.

Step 2: Find an extra-special treat (EST) that the dog likes and will get at no other time. This treat can even be junk food. Whatever it is, cut or break it into small, pea-sized pieces (unless it's a lickable treat, of course).

Find a comfortable, quiet place with few distractions where you and the dog can work. The area should be large enough so that the dog can move away from you if she chooses, but not so big that she can get to a place where she can't see or hear you.

Step 3: Have an ample amount of the EST with you. Sit at an angle so that you are not facing the dog directly, which can seem threatening to dogs. Before trying to approach or touch the dog, talk softly to her and observe her body language. Some dogs are soothed by the human voice; if that seems to be the case with your dog, you can talk softly throughout the session. Otherwise, remain silent while you work with the dog.

Step 4: Hold your ESTs in one hand and leave the other hand clean and dry. Reach out and touch a part of your dog's body, a spot where she is already comfortable being touched. As soon as you touch her, give her an EST, then withdraw both hands.

Tip: The best place to start touching most dogs is on the chest or shoulder. Most dogs don't like being touched on the face or having someone reach over the head when they are first getting used to handling. Likewise, most dogs are uncomfortable with having their feet touched. Remember, though, every dog is an individual and has different preferences. It is up to you to pay attention to where the dog seems most comfortable starting the touching process.

Step 5: Wait a few seconds and repeat Step 4.

Tip: Go slow. Moving too fast can overwhelm the dog, or make it difficult for her to make the association between getting touched and getting an EST.

Repeat the process of pairing the touch with the ESTs until the dog has made the association between being touched and getting the EST. You can tell she has made the association when

you touch her and she immediately looks at your treat hand and/or gives a “yippee” response (happy face, ears relaxed, tail wag, etc.).

Step 6: Gradually, a couple of inches at a time, start to touch the dog’s body closer to your end-goal location (moving up to the head, down to the feet, back across the torso to the tail, etc.).

Step 7: When the dog is readily accepting touch all over her body (she may even be leaning into the touch), start handling body parts rather than just touching them. For example, lift and hold her ears, lift her lips, pick up and hold her paws, hold her tail, scratch her sides.

Tip: Remember to always pair touching and handling with the ESTs and never go beyond the dog’s threshold. Always go at the dog’s pace, progressing to the next step only when she gives the “yippee” response at the current step.

Step 8: When the dog is readily accepting handling all over her body, begin to introduce whatever grooming or medical equipment is necessary for achieving your end-goal. Here are some examples:

To get your dog comfortable with brushing:

- Touch a brush to her shoulder and pair it with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, gradually move the brush toward your end-goal location on her body (as described in the steps above), pairing with ESTs, of course.
- When she’s comfortable with that, pair one short brush stroke with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, pair one long brush stroke with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, pair two long brush strokes with ESTs, working your way up to multiple brush strokes.

To get your dog comfortable with nail trimming:

- Touch the nail trimmers to one toenail and pair with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, tap the nail trimmers against a toenail and pair with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, hold a nail in the trimmers and pair with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, trim one nail and pair with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, trim two nails and pair with ESTs.
- When she’s comfortable with that, trim three nails and pair with ESTs, working your way up to trimming all her nails.

Whatever activity you’re trying to get her comfortable with (e.g., restraint hold, ear cleaning, tooth brushing, holding off veins for blood tests and injections), use a similar progression as described in the above examples, starting at very low intensity and building slowly, giving ESTs at each step.

Step 9: When the dog is comfortable and happy with the handling procedures, start to introduce her to locations where the handling will take place and to the equipment that will be used. This is technically part of the proofing process (see below), but since grooming and medical procedures are so frequently done at specific locations and with specific equipment, this step is necessary as part of the foundation of this training plan. As with the handling procedures, introduce new

places and equipment slowly and at an intensity (distance) at which the dog feels comfortable, pairing each with ESTs for the entire process.

- Examples of locations: clinic lobby, exam room, grooming facility. Take the dog to each location without having a procedure done. Just take her there to have ESTs and to have fun, and then leave.
- Examples of equipment: clippers, stethoscope, gauze, syringe. For scales and groomers' tables, practice having the dog get on and off, and then staying on.

Proofing

Proofing means teaching the dog to generalize the behavior in different contexts. Start the proofing process after the dog is comfortable with being touched and handled all over her body.

Handler: Practice handling in different positions — while you're squatting, standing, bending over the dog, and immediately after walking up to her. Then have other people practice handling with her.

Location: Practice handling in different locations.

Distractions: Practice handling in areas of higher energy and distractions.

Finally, begin combining all of the above scenarios: other people handling the dog in new places, coming from different angles surrounded by activity and distraction.

Notes

Every dog is different, and therefore will progress at his or her own pace. Some dogs may progress rapidly, being able to accept the final stage of handling after only a few days. Other dogs may take months or years to complete this training plan.

Whatever the case, there may be times when handling needs to be done whether or not the dog is ready (e.g., vet visits, grooming). These scenarios are unavoidable, but they do not have to cause a huge setback in training. If you are taking the lead on implementing the above training plan, try not to be involved in the scenarios when handling is necessary. Instead, ask for help from other people. Also, ask the veterinary or grooming staff to use minimal restraint and low-stress handling techniques in order to minimize the dog's traumatic experiences during these necessary procedures. By taking these simple steps, you can avoid huge setbacks and continue to make steady progress despite those necessary but unpleasant experiences.

If you get stuck on any step, stop and take a break. When you try again, go back to the previous step in the plan. If necessary, create intermediate steps with intensity and duration that your dog is comfortable with. Don't rush: Take it at the dog's speed.