



TRAINING TIPS

Counter-Conditioning

ADAPTED FOR HANDLING

This is a simple description of an approach to help your dog feel better about the things that create stress for him or her. The stressor—in this case being handled—is paired with particularly tasty food to help your dog feel good about being handled. The goal is for the positive response to the yummy food to be transferred to the handling.

Whenever possible work at a level of intensity where your dog is aware of the stressor, but is not moving away or presenting other stress signals. This is the ideal “mental space” for learning to take place.

1. Identify where your dog likes to be touched, and start there with a medium to light pressure. You want a pressure light enough not to be too intrusive, but not so light that it's annoying. Often a shoulder is a good place to start. Be sure not to lean over the dog or reach over his/her head as it makes many dogs uncomfortable.
2. Touch with your hand, then immediately present yummy, easy to eat, food. Remove both quietly at the same time, placing them out of view (such as behind your back).
3. Repeat, and slowly stroke toward more challenging areas, removing your hand and the food simultaneously before your dog gets worried.
4. Continue, moving around your dog's body, being sure to start at easier areas and move to more difficult areas very gradually.
5. If your dog is more comfortable with a lighter pressure begin to gently add a little more pressure occasionally.
6. If the paws are a particular concern for your dog, condition him or her to be comfortable with touch on the upper leg. Once s/he's comfortable, touch the upper leg and gently slide closer to the paws, removing your hand and the food before you get to the paws. Repeat, occasionally sliding onto the feet, until your dog isn't worried.
7. Every now and then be just a little slow in presenting the food after you touch the dog. If your dog looks to you as if to say “where are my treats?” s/he has begun to associate the stimulus (being touched) with the availability of food.

You can use this approach to help your dog accept veterinary handling and grooming, and learn to like cuddling.

Once you've built a positive response to handling you can begin to lean over your dog a little bit, or begin to reach over his/her head slightly, while feeding as above, to help him or her feel better about those challenging approaches as well.

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