

Teaching your dog.....Acceptance of Handling

Melanie Schlaginhaufen

You can help your family companion or foster dog become comfortable with vet visits, grooming and other handling experiences by teaching it to accept situations it may not otherwise prefer to experience. Practicing “handling exercises” also strengthens your relationship with your dog and builds trust.

This “exercise program” should be practiced daily for all puppies. It is also designed to make adult dogs more accepting of things they may find unpleasant. Note: If your dog has exhibited any signs of aggression (growling, snapping or biting), do *not* try to implement this program without the help of a qualified trainer or behavioral consultant who is experienced with desensitization techniques.

1) To start, practice in a calm, quiet room without distractions. Place one hand under your dog’s chin, with your fingers looped into your dog’s collar. Gently pull your dog a tad forward, bringing him into a stand position while your other hand is gently placed under tummy.



2) Calmly say “stand” and pull slightly forward (hand still under chin, fingers looped in collar). Support tummy with your other hand. At first, hold just 1-2 seconds, then release and praise.

3) Within a few days, begin holding your dog a little longer, removing one of your hands to gently stroke your dog’s side as it is standing. Do for 2-3 seconds, then release and praise.

4) As soon as your dog reliably stands while being stroked and is not trying to sit down, use one hand to hold its collar and the other hand to lift up each paw for a one second examination. This teaches your dog impulse control and acceptance (your dog is accepting benign restraint by being held by its collar, and is accepting having his foot lifted). Use

release word (okay) and calm praise, then repeat.

5) Work up to a more thorough examination of feet, then change exercise to include the following (one at a time, each time going back to one-second intervals to start):

- A) Rubbing hair backwards up the back
- B) Lift tail and gently pull
- C) Lift lip and glance at teeth
- D) Look in ears

6) Practice at least two different versions of this exercise daily, using a gentle tone to talk to your dog during the exercise, and calm praise afterwards. Do not “baby talk” the dog but instead just use calm praise (don’t say “it’s okay sweetie”....Instead, say “what a good boy”). Gradually increase the length of time you are rubbing dog’s hair, holding

tail, paw, etc. until you are spending 30 seconds on each part of the exercise. Your demeanor should remain calm and confident.

7) As dog becomes accustomed to the exercises, gradually progress through doing a thorough exam all at one time. As your dog accepts exam, gradually progress to doing exam without holding it by the collar. If your dog tries to get away or turn around, however, go back to holding in position with gentle collar pressure.

8) After a couple of weeks, change locations, do outside on a blanket, as well as inside, in the kitchen, in the garage, in the bedroom, etc. Add distractions - practice many varieties of the exercise until you know he has learned to accept an exam no matter what is going on around him. Add a different variation where he is lying down during examination. If a small dog, put a towel on top of your clothes dryer or a table and practice with him both standing and lying down on the table (similar to the exam at the vet's office). Once he is used to your examination, gradually practice it with other people. These exercises, although simple, are an important part of teaching your dog to accept handling by others.

©2004-2008, Melanie Schlaginhausen, all rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any fashion without written permission from the author.