

Puppy Handling and Food Bowl Exercises – Preventing Problems

What are handling exercises and why might they be useful?

Exercises that use gentle and positive handling can help to increase the enjoyment and decrease any fear associated with handling and restraint. In addition, they provide a means for achieving a relaxed state, which might then be used if the dog begins to get excited or aroused. Verbal exercises can and should also be used to help achieve a relaxed state (See our settle exercise handouts). While the physical contact and attention you provide may be sufficiently reinforcing for most puppies, food treats can also be paired with handling to mark and reward the desirable response. One important principle to always keep in mind is that the hand should always be an indication that something good is about to happen (e.g. the hand is a friend). This means that physical punishment and forceful handling must be avoided.



At what age might handling exercises begin?

Young puppies should be handled regularly, at least a couple of times a day. In fact, puppies that are handled each day from birth onward are generally faster to develop, more able to handle stress, and perhaps more social than those that have not been handled regularly. Therefore obtaining puppies that have been reared in a home environment with regular handling would be very beneficial.

From the time you first obtain your new puppy, you will want to engage in frequent handling simply to provide regular and positive physical contact from family members. Over time, handling should progress to all parts of the body, including mild forms of restraint, to gradually and positively accustom your puppy to procedures that might be needed later in life. For example, gentle handling around the muzzle, face and ears might help prepare the puppy for teeth brushing and cleaning of the ears and face. Similarly, stroking and rubbing all areas of the body can help to accustom the dog to grooming, while handling the feet can help to prepare the puppy for nail trimming. Training the dog to be lifted and carried, or to roll over on its side or back for a tummy rub can also be valuable exercises to insure safety in later handling. Remember to keep each handling exercise positive; a few food treats given with each exercise can be helpful. Ending the session when the puppy is relaxed and calm can help in establishing these handling exercises as one method of settling your dog when it gets excited. These exercises are not intended to force your puppy to accept handling; in fact forceful handling is likely to lead to escape and defensive behavior, and fear and anxiety about

further handling. Therefore each session should end on a calm note and must not proceed beyond a level that the puppy will not tolerate.

What type of exercises might help to adapt my puppy to handling?

There are three important areas where working with your puppy and planning ahead can help avoid future problems. These are body handling, food bowl handling and toy handling.

Body Handling

You will do yourself and your new pet a favor by teaching your new puppy to allow you to handle his body. Throughout the life of your dog, there will be times that you need to restrain your dog, lift your dog or handle various parts of the dog's body. This may become necessary when its time to brush your dog's teeth, trim its nails, give medication, or clean its ears. Yet if you have never handled an adult dog these simple tasks could become impossible. Handling also serves to simulate the physical communication that is exhibited by a bitch controlling her puppies or a leader dog over a subordinate group member. The young puppy must be taught to feel comfortable with this type of handling.

Gently handle your puppy daily. Pick a time when your puppy is calm, such as just after a nap. Do not try to start a body handling exercise when your puppy is excited, rambunctious or in the mood for play. Place the puppy in your lap and touch the feet, open the mouth, look in the ears and under the tail. All the while, praise your puppy for being good, even offer a few tasty food treats. Be sure to keep initial sessions very short, since you want your puppy to succeed and not struggle. If the session is too long you run the risk of the puppy struggling and getting free. This is not the message you want your puppy to learn. Gradually increase the amount of time you control your puppy so that no struggle ensues. Soon the puppy will allow and perhaps anticipate these handling sessions. **All** family members should participate in this exercise. An adult should supervise young children. If you see any hesitation or reluctance on the part of the puppy, you will want to repeat the exercise until you can accomplish the handling without resistance. Do the same exercise a little more gently or in a slightly different location, give some tasty treats for compliance, and progress gradually to more difficult situations. Never force the puppy to the point that it exhibits fear or attempts escape. On the other hand if you do not gradually overcome the resistance, the puppy may never allow the handling as an adult. Over time your puppy should allow you to place pressure on the back of its neck while it is in a down position, to roll it onto its side, to grasp its muzzle like you might administer medication and to be lifted (if it is small enough). These

forms of handling should not be used for punishment.



Food bowl handling

Another important exercise is to acclimate your puppy to having his food and possessions touched by humans. Dogs in the wild will guard their food to prevent its loss, but that is not necessary in the home. You need to teach the puppy that you are not going to take away the food and not give it back. Handle the food bowl while your puppy eats, pet your puppy and every now and then lift the bowl, place in a special

treat, and return it. Similarly, when walking past the puppy while it is eating, you can place a treat in its food bowl, or reach down, pat the puppy and give a treat. This way the puppy learns to tolerate intrusions and disturbance while it eats and will not be startled and react aggressively should something unexpected happen when eating. If the treat you add is tasty enough, the puppy may even look forward to your approaches during feeding. If any growling should occur you should seek professional guidance immediately. If there is competition with other dogs over food, the puppy should be fed separately or perhaps even in another room.

Toy handling

You should also practice gently taking toys from the puppy. Quietly and calmly place your hand on the toy and tell your puppy “give” as you remove it from its mouth. Then say ‘thank-you’ and return the object as you tell your puppy to ‘take it’. Repeat this training task multiple times daily in multiple locations. At times take the object and offer a treat instead. If the puppy enjoys chasing the toy, you could also play a chase and retrieve game. It is generally best to schedule play times regularly throughout the day rather than allowing the puppy to initiate games of tug and chase. In this way, attention-seeking behavior is not reinforced, and toys can be used as a reward for desirable behavior. In fact, toy-handling exercises can be used to teach the ‘give’ command. If the puppy learns that something good comes when relinquishing objects, you should soon be able to handle any toy that your puppy has. Your puppy will learn that it is okay for you to handle its possessions, and that you will give them back. The puppy should then be unconcerned should you need to remove something from the mouth. Occasionally there are likely to be items the puppy really wants, such as very delectable food items or chew bones. If the puppy protects these items, lure the puppy away with another treat and go back and get the items. Avoid giving them to your puppy in the future.



What if my puppy resists?

Some puppies resist certain forms of handling and may try to escape or even become defensive. Although these forms of handling should initially be avoided, it should be your long-term goal to overcome this resistance through positive reinforcement and shaping. To achieve success, especially with puppies that resist, follow a few basic guidelines:

1. Begin these exercises when the puppy is in the mood, but not necessarily when the puppy is demanding affection or attention, as this might reinforce demanding and attention seeking behavior. Wait for a time when the puppy is calm and quiet, perhaps just as it is awakening from a rest time. In addition, if you give the puppy all the affection it wants, whenever it wants, then there may be times when it is resistant and doesn't want any more. Therefore the first rule of thumb is to use a “learn to earn program” (see our handout) where affection and social contact is given as a reward for desirable behavior. Try giving a ‘sit’ or ‘lie down’ command when the puppy seems to want attention and then give the affection as a reward. Another option is to call the puppy (e.g. come) or go to the puppy to give attention when it is resting quietly on the floor or when it is chewing on a favored toy. Be aware of any threats or anxiety however, as this might indicate emerging possessive behavior.

2. Ensure that the puppy is enjoying itself during petting and affection. Try to end your session with the puppy relaxed and still in the mood for more, rather than when the puppy resists and indicates that it has had enough.
3. Shape gradually more desirable responses by beginning with the type of handling that the puppy enjoys and craves (e.g. stroking the head, rubbing the belly) and progress to other areas of the body such as around the muzzle, the back of the neck, the body, the legs and feet, the belly and around the tail.
4. At any point, if the puppy resists or objects, you should attempt to settle the puppy down and stop the exercises. While we do not want to force the puppy to accept something that it does not like, we also do not want the puppy to learn that escape or biting will be a successful way to end the session. A head halter might be considered for further training to ensure a successful conclusion to each session.
5. If you have encountered resistance during a previous session, determine the puppy's limits and use food treats or favored toys to distract the puppy as you begin to handle these areas. Once the pet associates the handling with something positive you can proceed slowly, always ending on a positive note.
6. Ultimately you will want to progress to procedures such as turning the dog onto its side back or belly, lifting, brushing or combing the coat, brushing the gums and teeth, trimming the nails or even taking the dog's temperature. Therefore handling exercises should be designed to achieve these goals while the puppy is still young and manageable by progressing very slowly and using favored rewards for distraction and counter-conditioning (see our handout) whenever necessary, to ensure a positive outcome.
7. Continue to progress by proofing your puppy against the types of handling that it may one day need to confront. At this point, verbal commands may also be useful. For example, lifting may be preceded by the "up" command and your dog can receive favored rewards while being carried. During a "down" exercise you might consider adding some light pressure downward on the neck or back (as might happen if a child were to rest against the dog). During standing the tail might be lifted or handled; during the sit the muzzle might be gently grasped; and during the sit, stand or down, gentle hugging might be practiced. While it is generally advisable to avoid these types of handling, as a rewarded exercise during training these forms of physical restraint can be valuable learning experiences.

How can I progress to nail trimming?

Nail trimming in a sense is just a progression of the above exercises. Unfortunately, dogs that are sensitive about having their feet restrained and those that have had an unpleasant nail trimming experience can be difficult to improve.

For training, you should take the pet's favored rewards and use them to gradually accustom the pet to nail handling and trimming. Once the pet will lie or sit quietly and comfortably for rewards, the steps might be to progressively associate favored toys and rewards with a) handling the feet b) putting a small amount of pressure on each toe during handling, c) having a nail trimmer in hand while handling feet; d) touching the nail trimmer (or a metal nail file) to the toes while holding them in place e) snapping the nail trimmer after touching each toe f) gently snipping or filing the end of each toe. You will need to progress as quickly or as slowly as your dog will tolerate, always ending on a positive note. A head halter can help ensure restraint and eye contact, and where necessary can be used to close the mouth and prevent escape. Until the pet is used to

having its nails touched, filed or trimmed, it is advisable to avoid any excessive restraint or traumatic nail-trimming events, as these may be difficult to overcome once they have been experienced.

How can I progress to teeth cleaning?

Although dental toys and dental foods and treats can be useful, brushing of the pet's teeth and treating the gums of pets with dental problems are procedures that your dog should learn to accept and hopefully enjoy. Once the pet will lie or sit quietly and comfortably for rewards, the steps might be to



progressively associate favored treats, flavored spreads and flavored tooth pastes with a) handling and rubbing around the muzzle b) lifting the lips and using a food-flavored toothpaste on the outer surfaces of the teeth (if the pet resists you might want try beginning with a food spread such as cheese or pate) c) using a finger, finger brush, cloth or gauze square to rub the toothpaste

along the teeth d) increase the sessions to longer rubbing and cleaning of the outer surfaces and e) moving to a tooth brush if possible. Alternative products such as dental chews, dental sprays, dental wipes, etc., may prove more practical for some owners. Associating rewards with the sessions, before, during and after, can help keep dental care a positive event.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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