



Handling Exercises for Veterinary Exams & Grooming

A Special APDT Chronicle of the Dog Student Handout

by Terry Long, CPDT

One of the saddest things to see is a dog that is absolutely terrified of something as simple as a nail trim. Some dogs lose control of bodily functions, scream in terror, struggle violently, and bite and scratch in their frantic attempts to avoid having their nails trimmed. Some dogs have to be sedated or even anesthetized for this simple procedure. Others go without nail trims, which often results in dangerously long nails that can get caught in carpeting and can also cause the dog to adopt an unnatural gait, which can cause joint discomfort. It doesn't have to be this way. All dogs will eventually have to be groomed, vaccinated, examined, restrained, etc., so it's best to teach your dog, early in its life to, if not enjoy these procedures, to tolerate them.

Tools you will need . . .

- Cotton balls or plain cleansing pads
- Nail trimmers and short, wooden match sticks
- Yummy treats

The following procedures apply equally to puppies as well as older dogs. In no case should these procedures turn into a wrestling match or a test of who is "dominant." It is a natural reaction for animals to resist being restrained. It is **not**

a show of dominance! It's scary to be restrained and fight they will—they are hard-wired to do so.

Please note: Owners of dogs and puppies that have a severe reaction to having their nails trimmed should ask their veterinarian about sedating the dog for nail trims until the desensitization process is completed. They can also consider the old tactic of walking their dogs on sidewalks in an attempt to wear the nails down naturally.

1. Restraint

Start by getting some yummy treats handy. Hold your dog comfortably in your lap. **Gently** place your hands over the dog's shoulders with the heels of your hands on the top and your fingers wrapping around toward the chest. **Briefly** (no more than a second or two) apply a **small** amount of pressure, say "Yes!" for the dog not reacting (if the dog reacts, you are using too much pressure or doing it for too long—back up), and give the dog a treat and pet and praise him. **Gradually** build up until you can exert a little more pressure and/or for longer periods of time without your dog resisting. Reward profusely each time.

When your dog is accustomed to having his shoulders held, use the same **gradual** process to ac-

custom him to:

- having his foot held.
- having his leg held (each one, one at a time).
- having his shoulders held.
- having his hips held between your hands.
- having his head held between your hands.
- having his entire body held (tucked against your side, with the front end held by your hand and the hips tucked in by your elbow).
- having his head held in the crook of your arm (do this only if you have successfully performed all of the above, and be sure to keep your face away from the dog's mouth).

If your dog fights, struggles, growls, or bites during the beginning stages of these exercises, obtain the services of a positive reinforcement trainer to help you.

2. Physical Exams

Accustom your dog to a variety of "mock examinations."

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- **Mouth:** Gently open your dog's mouth an inch or so. Say "Yes!" for the dog not reacting (if he reacts, you need to back up and just briefly touch the dog's lips or open the mouth less), and give the dog a treat and pet and praise him. **Gradually** build up until you can open the mouth wider, move your fingers around the lips, and gently press down on the tongue. Reward profusely each time. One trick that works well after the dog is accustomed to having you handle his lips and mouth is to open your dog's mouth and press a treat down on his tongue for him to eat. Surprise!
- **Ears:** Lift or touch the flap of one of the dog's ears and gently and briefly touch the skin around the ear. Say "Yes!" for the dog not reacting, and give the dog a treat and pet and praise him. **Gradually** build up until you can touch all areas on the outside of the ear and eventually press a fingertip into the inside of the ear (don't poke down into the ear canal; just the surface outside it). Reward profusely each time. Next, take a cotton ball or plain cotton pad (sold in stores as face cleansers), and gently wipe the ear flap and

the area just outside the ear canal. Reward profusely each time!

- **Feet and Toes:** Gently hold your dog's paw in your hand and reward him for letting you hold it for longer and longer periods of time. **Gradually** apply a little bit of pressure to the paw. **Gradually** build up to the point where you are touching each toe and exerting mild pressure on each toe to the point where the nail is lifted. **Go slowly**; this is the foundation of a nail trim and for checking between toes for those nasty foxtails (plant seeds that cause pain and abscesses).
- **Nail Trims:** Here is a great exercise from British trainer John Rogerson. In separate handling exercises, accustom your dog to the sight and sound of nail clippers by placing them on the floor for the dog to sniff. Reward for any curiosity or interaction with the clippers. Next, pick up the clippers and flex them in your hands so the dog gets used to them in your hands, both the sight and the sounds. Take a wooden matchstick, and clip the matchstick into several pieces, tossing the dog a treat each time you clip. Clipping

the matchstick sounds very similar to the sound made by trimming a dog's nails!

Only when your dog thoroughly enjoys having his feet and toes handled and is accustomed to the sound of the clippers clipping the matchstick do you go to the next stage: fake clipping of the nails. Pick up the dog's foot and place a matchstick under the foot and clip the matchstick while it is in the same hand as the dog's foot. Reward, repeat, reward. When your dog is used to this, trim the very tip *only* of one of the dog's nails. Reward profusely. Stop. Do additional nails in several other separate sessions and only gradually build up until you can trim several nails in one session.

The gradual process of desensitization described above will help your dog lifelong.

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