

Preparing a Puppy for Grooming

by Nikki Myers

Grooming is a large part of life for many dogs. Regular baths and haircuts are necessary for any cute little fluffy dog so that she can stay a cherished, clean member of the house. For some dogs this can be a traumatic experience. Though much of a dog's experience depends largely on the groomer the owner eventually chooses, there are a few quick training steps that can be taken with a puppy to make grooming easier.

Socialization to grooming should start very early. If your clients wait until grooming is needed before taking any steps to see a groomer, the puppy can be nearly six months old and very unruly for handling. Daily grooming training can be done in just a few minutes a day. Here are some of the sights, sounds, and sensations that a puppy will experience in their grooming lifetime. Using a few suggested exercises, paired with a complete handling desensitization program, will make grooming more enjoyable when the time comes.

Sights

The sights experienced on a trip to the groomer range from other dogs and cats to large equipment. Aside from the shop environment itself, the process of being groomed can include all of the following:

- *Shiny and long objects in a person's hand*

Scissors for trimming and hemostats for hair plucking can be scary for a shy dog. Condition a positive association to objects picked up and moved towards the puppy.

- *Brushes and blow dryers moving*

quickly towards the body and head

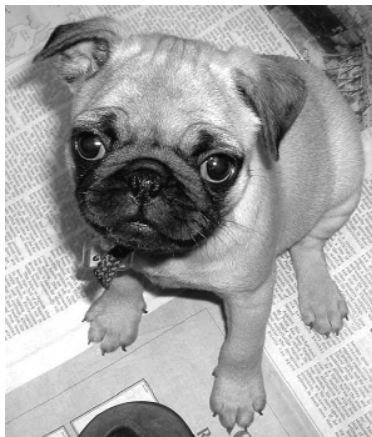
Brushes come in many shapes and sizes. Blow dryers are strangely shaped. Add them to the classical conditioning sessions.

- *The groomer's face very close to the puppy's face*

For some breeds, and their mixes, very detailed clipping and scissoring is needed on the head and face.

- *Height*

The view from up on a table is very different. A puppy needs to realize there are edges to the table. One easy way to show them this is to place the puppy on a table (place a rubber backed bath mat on



the table for traction) and lure the puppy slowly to the edge. Lower the treat below the edge, as if you were luring a down. The puppy will lie down with her feet over the edge and reach for the treat. Do this at each edge.

Sounds

Grooming shops can be very noisy. Not all the sounds will be new to a puppy, but the constant noise and so many at one time can be stressful.

- *Noisy equipment such as clippers and blow dryers*

Clients rarely have clippers of their own, but almost every household has a blow dryer. Describe a gradual desensitization program and get them started right away.

- *Running water*

The sound of a wide-open faucet is very noisy and a blast of water in conjunction with it makes the sound a predictor of bad things. The same kind of desensitization program used with the blow dryer will work with water.

- *Scissors opening and closing*

This is a very distinct sound, like that of nails being clipped. It is quick and sharp and may be very close to the ear. Open and close any household scissors all around the puppy's body without actually making contact. Work with the puppy until she accepts hands around the muzzle and the scissors rubbed along the head, cheeks, and between the eyes.

- *Items dropped on the floor*

It happens. It doesn't happen on purpose, but it happens. And if a groomer drops scissors or clippers, loud expletives may follow.

Sensations

If you look at the handling a dog gets during grooming, groomers do some very rude things. A comprehensive handling desensitization program will get puppies used to the grabbing and the holding. Here are a few to be sure to add for grooming preparation.

- *Brushing*

Gentle brushing should be a part

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of a puppy's everyday life. Hair should be gently brushed against natural growth as well as with the growth of the hair.

- *Wet feet, hair, and skin*

Water all over the body is a very new sensation. When first introduced, cup warm water from an already filled source (so the sound of running water and the strange new sensation are not paired). To avoid unpleasant sensations, fold the little ears so water does not go down into the ear and don't tip the head straight up or water may run into the pup's nose.

- *Slippery surfaces*

A good groomer will have non-slip surfaces in the bath tubs and on the grooming tables, but one slip in a home tub or sink can create a bad memory that goes with the puppy to the grooming shop for the first time.

- *Vibrations on the body*

Clippers can tickle or simply frighten a dog when the vibrations of the motor come into contact with her body. Desensitization to this sensation may have to include a trip to a grooming shop.

- *Hair pulling*

Plucking and hand-stripping involves pulling out dead or shedding hair and it is done on most terrier breeds. Also, many breeds need to have hair plucked from the ear canal to keep good airflow and prevent yeast and bacteria buildup. Stroke the puppy's hair between two fingers so that there is some tension on the hair. Feed puppy during this procedure. More pressure can gradually be added, but no hair pulled out yet. Owners unfamiliar with the hair that needs to be

removed might make the mistake of pulling out live hair. Ouch!

- *Blowing on the body and in face*

Most groomers who trim the head with scissors will cut a little, and blow the clipped hair away before starting to trim again. (I did it all the time.) Discourage play at home that involves blowing at the dog to stir them up or tease them. Likewise, hair "tickling" to make them jump should be avoided. Of course the context is different. A groomer handling the head with scissors and the owner rolling on the floor chasing the puppy are very different. But a puppy sensitized to air blowing can find such a thing uncomfortable from a groomer.

Encourage your clients to find a groomer as early as possible. They should go observe not only to be sure the groomers are gentle, but also to see what type of handling and equipment will be used with their dog. They will get a better idea of what to put in their puppy's grooming prep program at home. Early trips to the groomer do not have to include a body clip and a huge change in the puppy's look. Baths, ear cleaning, and feet trims are simple and get the puppy used to

the environment of a busy salon.

Nikki Myers is an instructor for DogPACT (Long Beach, CA) teaching agility and pet manners. She is a founding member of the Woof Gang Flyball Club of Orange County (CA) and has traveled across the country to teach at the Iron Dogs Sports Camps. She was a professional groomer for over seven years in a busy Southern California veterinary hospital, coordinating the puppy daycare program, and starting many puppies on grooming preparation programs.



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