

Teaching Your Dog the Joys of Touch

By Sherry Woodard

Many dogs have sensitive areas where they would rather not be touched. If you've adopted a dog with an unknown past, you may never know what past experiences triggered your dog's current aversion to having certain areas of his body touched.



These past experiences may have included one or more of the following:

- If the dog's nails were cut to the quick, it is very painful. The next time someone tries to lift and hold a paw, the dog may expect pain.
- If the dog was badly matted or overdue for a grooming, her hair may have been pulled during grooming. Mats themselves can become painful as they pull on the skin.
- A lack of socialization is a common reason that some dogs don't enjoy touch as much as they would if they had been properly socialized.

You don't have to accept the status quo, however. You can help the dogs in your life learn to enjoy touch more. First, see a veterinarian to rule out any medical causes for the discomfort. Then, you can begin to work on teaching your dog new associations to touch.

Here are a few things you will need:

- Comfortable clothes that allow you to move freely.
- A lead, to let the dog have freedom of movement without allowing wandering.
- A washable mat big enough for you and the dog to sit on. Ideally, the mat would be big enough so the dog could lay down on the mat next to you or between your legs.
- A treat pouch, such as a fanny pack with a zipper or other closable pouch.
- Treats to fill the pouch. The treats should be small enough so that doling out many treats won't be a meal or cause stomach upset. (Try mixing dry kibble and soft moist kibble.)
- A grooming kit: a comb, a brush, and nail clippers. (These are for teaching more than actual grooming.)

If you are doing this exercise at home, you might want to work with soothing music playing, to reduce distractions. To get started, put the dog on lead and wear your treat pouch. If the dog is too focused on the pouch, you can keep the treats in a plastic bag inside the pouch to control yummy smells until you are ready to give a treat.

Next, place your mat and grooming tools on the floor and allow or, if needed, encourage the dog to investigate. Sit on the mat with the dog and bring her toward you with the lead. Don't stare directly into the dog's eyes or lean over the dog, since the dog may find this behavior threatening. Allow the dog about 2 1/2 feet of lead for movement. Once she relaxes — either in a standing, sitting or prone position — you can loosen the lead, but keep it under part of your body so that she cannot wander off.

Make sure you are relaxed yourself – if this exercise is going to be relaxing for the dog, you must be relaxed as well. Start talking to the dog using a calm, soothing voice. If your dog has been very aversive to touch, don't touch her at all this first session — just reward her with treats for being comfortable with you nearby.

During the next session, repeat what you did the first session, giving treats when she seems relaxed. Then, touch her, using gentle pressure, on spots that are in her comfort zone. Move your hand slowly so you don't startle her. Again, give treats as rewards for being relaxed. Try not to touch the spots that she is uncomfortable with. Depending on how sensitive the dog is, she may relax quickly or not relax much the first time. You might have to do several sessions before you see and feel the changes in her energy and body language.

Some dogs are fearful of touch in general and will need many sessions of these exercises to become relaxed. All sessions should be kept short, starting with five minutes. When the dog begins to relax, add five more minutes, and continue adding time until the dog is able to fall asleep.

Some dogs need help on very specific body parts, such as feet or ears. If that's the case with your dog, don't touch those areas the first couple of sessions, just get close to them without touching them. After several sessions, move near the problem area and then touch it, watching closely for a reaction. Use caution here! If he has a negative reaction (such as moving away from you), stop and start touching other parts of his body again. Gradually work your way back to the problem area, and then touch the sensitive spot. If he reacts positively, give a treat and repeat the process: Touch his whole body and return to the problem area, giving a treat if he stays relaxed. Remember to keep the sessions short until you have a relaxed dog.

Once you have a relaxed dog, you can proceed to lifting and holding his paws, lifting his lips and rubbing his gums, giving hugs, combing and brushing, and looking in his ears. If you want to progress to clipping his nails, the first step is to simply move the nail clippers near his feet. Next, just touch the clippers on the nails and watch your dog's reaction. Always back up the process if he appears anxious or upset.

The key is to do everything slowly and gently. The goal is to teach the dog to enjoy being touched everywhere, not just to tolerate handling. If you can achieve that, you'll have a relaxed dog with good associations to the presence of the handler, the act of being handled and the use of grooming tools.

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