

GET A HANDLE ON IT

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Our veterinarian never fails to comment on the fact that our dogs accept his ministrations with unfailing good graces when they go in for their annual well-dog physicals. He can draw blood from happily offered paws with the vet tech providing only token restraint. Temperature-taking is met with stoic resolve, hands-on physical exams with doggie grins and wagging tails.

Have you taken your dog to see your veterinarian lately? If you dread those trips - if your vet hospital experiences are somewhat less positive than ours, you and your furry four-legged friend have some homework to do.

Dogs do not naturally love to be touched, held, patted and probed by humans. In the wild canine world, that kind of intrusive physical contact offered by another dog is very threatening, and valid cause for flight or fight. Domestic dogs have to be taught from early puppyhood to accept the hugging and touching that is second nature to us primates. This is part of the all-important socialization process that puppies need to undergo starting as early as four weeks. The sooner they are taught to associate good stuff with being handled, the better they will be able to adapt to the strange human culture in which they are expected to live. Dogs who try to fight back or run away in response to human touch tend to have difficult lives at best, short life spans at worst.

Puppy Socialization

Once upon a time, before the importance of early socialization was widely recognized, puppies weren't introduced to training classes until the advanced age of six months. This was partly because the choke chains once universally used for training could damage the tender cartilage of a young pup's trachea. It was also because many veterinarians, concerned first and foremost about the transmission of potentially deadly diseases such as distemper and parvovirus, routinely cautioned their clients against taking their puppies *anywhere* until they were fully vaccinated, at the age of 6 months.

In the last 10-15 years two things have changed for the immense betterment of dog-kind. The emergence of a new dog training philosophy that emphasizes gentle, positive training using flat collars, head halters and harnesses instead of choke chains and prong collars has made it possible for owners to take their baby dogs to good puppy training and socialization classes without fear of collapsed tracheas. Also, modern veterinarians who recognize that the risk to a dog's long-term well-being from poor socialization is greater than the risk from exposure to disease in a well-run puppy class, now urge their clients to enroll in puppy training as soon as possible.

Puppy socialization starts even before puppy class, however. A responsible breeder begins carefully handling the pups she has bred at the age of four weeks, giving them a positive association with being touched and held by lifting them gently and setting them back down before they have a chance to stress and struggle. She also invites friends over to handle the puppies so the youngsters are introduced to a variety of different humans at an early age. By the time they are eight-weeks-old and ready to go to their new homes, the pups associate being touched, held and petted with lots of good stuff - tasty treats, human attention, and play sessions.

Note to puppy-owners-to-be: when selecting your new four-footed family member, it's wise to choose an obviously well-socialized puppy who is friendly, outgoing, and clearly

enjoys being handled and held. If you fall for the trap of feeling sorry for the shy pup who hides in the corner, you will be taking on a huge challenge, and are likely to find yourself trying to catch up on his missed socialization lessons for the rest of his life.

Now it's your turn as the well-handled pup's new owner to take over the job of socialization. If you fail build on the breeder's solid foundation, the early work will be wasted. Dogs need ongoing socialization throughout their lives to keep the lessons fresh, but it is especially important during the first year. While it's not a good idea to take your pup to the local dog park just yet, or let him play with stray dogs in the neighborhood, you do want to continue exposing him to lots of friendly humans – all shapes, sizes, ages and colors. Ply him with treats when he meets new people, and have his new human friends offer him tasty tidbits as well.

In addition to meeting lots of people, this is the time when he needs to meet the rest of the world, including that puppy class we mentioned previously. Take him with you as much as safely possible, making all the experiences fun and positive. Dog cookies while you wait in line at the bank. Bits of chicken from well-mannered toddlers at the playground. Drop in at your vet's office several times a week and ask the staff to feed him tasty treats. Carry a squeeze tube of peanut butter in your jacket pocket and let him lick off a blob when a loud truck goes by. Enroll him in a puppy class that allows socialization with other appropriate pups. Set a goal to introduce him to at least 100 different people and 100 different places by the time he is four months old – then keep a log to document your progress toward that goal. Teach him that the world is a good and safe place to be.

Handling Body Parts

All that socialization will *help* you achieve happy vet office and groomer visits, but if you really want a doggie grin and wagging tail when your dog is on the exam table, you need to practice specific handling exercises that accustom your dog to having all of his body parts handled.

Some dogs are touchier about certain body parts than others. Dogs with long droopy ears, like Cocker Spaniels, are prone to ear infections, and hence tend to be quite sensitive about their ears – they hurt! – or they may have hurt in the past. Other dogs just don't like certain parts handled or examined. Most common areas of sensitivity are ears, mouth, neck, feet, hindquarters and tail. If your dog has "issues" about a particular part of his body, you will want to proceed very slowly in that area, and spend extra time there with your desensitization. If there aren't any issues, it's still a great idea to do these exercises as handling insurance.

Desensitization is simply the process of changing your dog's negative association with a particular stimulus – in this case, being touched – to positive. The easiest way to do this is using tasty treats. Boiled chicken (or canned, rinsed and drained) works well for most dogs. Your challenge is to go slowly, always working at a level that doesn't trigger a strong reaction (fight or flight) from your dog. With each body part, your goal is to condition your dog to *love* being touched, not just submit to or tolerate it.

Let's take paws, for example. Lots of dogs object to having their feet handled, often because they've had unhappy nail-trimming experiences. Perhaps your dog is fine if you touch his shoulder, but starts getting nervous if you go below the elbow. Start your paw desensitization exercise by touching him just *above* the elbow, then feeding him a tidbit of chicken.

Repeat this exercise until your touch above his elbow causes him to look happily to you for chicken. You want him to think that a touch near the elbow *makes* chicken appear. When you see his “Where’s my chicken?!” response to your touch, move down a half-inch and start touching there. When he gives you the “Chicken!” response there, move down again. Continue this until you can touch his paw and get the happy “Chicken!” response. Remember that your challenge is to go slowly enough that you never evoke a strong negative response from him. You are trying to create a *positive* association with being touched, and it will be much harder to accomplish that if you keep causing *negative* reactions.

When you can touch his paw and get a happy response, lift the paw gently and set it back down – then give chicken. *Don’t try to hold onto it yet!* You still need to proceed very slowly, gradually increasing the length of time you lift the paw, and the amount of holding pressure, until you can hold his paw firmly without an adverse reaction. Good job!

Of course – you’re not done yet – he has three more paws... Depending on your dog, you may accomplish paw-holding in one session, or it may take several weeks. You might be able to work on all four feet in one session, or you and your dog may make better progress if you work on one paw at a time. Each dog is an individual, and you need to pay attention to your dog’s level of stress and response to your actions. If he stresses easily, it’s better to do several short sessions in a day rather than one long one.

Remember that you want to end on a high note – so if you’ve had good success with one leg and think one or both of you is nearing your tolerance limit, it’s time to stop, and pick up again later. Each time you start anew, begin where you *know* he is comfortable being touched and proceed from there – although you will probably be able to proceed more quickly in each subsequent session with the territory you’ve already covered.

When your dog is happy to have *you* touch his paws, you can have *other* people touch his paws. (If he doesn’t object to you handling his paws from square one, you can start right at this point.) Being slowly, with friends he knows and likes, and, of course, associate all touching with tasty treats. Let him greet the person (politely, we hope), and then you feed the treats while the friend gently touches his legs and feet.

When he is happy about having friends touch and hold his paws, take him out in public. Draft fellow shoppers at your local pet supply store to play the paw-touch game with your dog. Most are pet owners themselves and will be happy to oblige, at least for a brief session. Ask the staff at your vet hospital to help with the touch exercise. (Find out when their slow times are and stop in then, so they will have time to help you.) Have them practice with you in the reception area, and if there’s an empty exam room, try it on the table, too. If the vet happens to have a moment, ask if she can come in for a friendly greeting as well, so that every encounter with the vet doesn’t involve poking and prodding.

You can modify the paw-touching exercise for all the other sensitive body parts. Remember to go slowly to avoid triggering strong reactions. When your dog is happy to have *you* touch each new body part, again, help him *generalize* his new, positive association to other people and places.

Relax

Another exercise you can teach your dog to make vet visits, grooming and other handling easier for all concerned is “Relax.” This simply involves teaching your dog to lie calmly on his side while he is touched, poked, prodded and handled. Most dogs like a nice tummy rub, so when you get the “Relax” behavior, you can also reward him by *gently* stroking or scratching his underside. (No vigorous rubbing – remember that you are trying to get him to be *relaxed* in this position.) If you and your dog already have a “belly-up” behavior on cue, you’re already there!

Here’s how to teach “Relax”:

Ask your dog to “down.” When he does, praise him quietly, but don’t give him a treat yet. Observe his down position. If he is lying on one hip with his hind legs out to one side, you’re ready to start “relax.” If he’s perfectly square, lying in the “sphinx” position, you need to get him to rock onto one hip first.

To rock him onto one hip, let him see a treat in your hand, then slowly move the treat in a semi-circle “hip curl” from the tip of his nose toward a point on his spine between his shoulder and his hip. As he follows it with his nose he should rock onto one hip. Feed him the treat. Now continue to move the treat over the top of his spine until he starts to roll onto his side. As he rolls, move the treat toward, then over, his head to a point on the floor just in front of his nose. (This will get him to lay his head on the floor.)

As soon as he is flat give him the treat – near the floor so he stays flat. Feed him several treats in this position so he realizes that *staying* flat is very rewarding. This is a great time to practice gently handling him all over, so he will accept grooming and veterinary exams. Don’t worry if he jumps up when you stop feeding treats - you can work on getting him to stay there longer, later. When he will stay in the “relax” position for several seconds or more you can give him that soothing tummy rub or do some massage techniques as a life reward.

Repeat this sequence until he is luring into the relax position easily for you each time. Then start giving the verbal “relax” cue first and minimizing the lure, until he will relax onto his side for you on just the verbal cue. You can also teach him a hand signal or finger cue for “relax.”

Your Veterinarian

If you practice these handling exercises with your dog and teach him to relax on cue, your veterinarian will love you both. It will be easier for her to make an accurate assessment of your dog’s condition, and get more reliable readings on blood tests. You’ll minimize the risk of your dog biting someone, and eliminate the need for stress-inducing muzzles during exams. Just as important, you and your dog will be able to enjoy those visits to the vet office instead of stressing over them, and that’s a very good thing - we can all use less stress in our lives!