

Teaching dogs to be handled happily - for vet checks, medication and grooming

Handling dogs in order to restrain, groom or medicate them is something that many of us take for granted, however the reality is that this can be scary and confusing for our dogs! Lots of dogs love to be stroked and certainly enjoy a good old fuss, but might become worried about more formal handling such as when we closely examine specific parts of their bodies.

Dogs don't necessarily understand why we have suddenly changed the way we are touching them, and rather than fussing them are now holding parts of their bodies – such as their ears or paws - firmly and still. They have no way of knowing that we are looking 'just to make sure everything is alright', so this can result in them becoming worried or frightened, especially if handling is uncomfortable or painful for them. If your dog is in pain they are more likely to show fear and respond aggressively. If you think they have a health issue, its best to take them straight to the vet.

How do I know how my dog feels about handling?

A dog who is happy and confident being handled should choose to remain with you while you hold and look at different parts of their body. There should be no tension within their face or body, which should remain relaxed while they are being handled, and they should readily and willingly co-operate with you.

Our body language handout might be a useful read.

When dogs become worried about something they generally choose to move themselves away from it, to a place where they feel much safer, however when we're handling them - in order to examine a part of them closely for example – we usually hold them still so they can't get away! When dogs feel as though they're unable to move away from something worrying them this limits the ways in which they can behave!

Dogs that are worried about handling can show a variety of behaviours:

- ✿ Some dogs might want to run right away and try to completely avoid the situation altogether, so they might become very wriggly and squirm around in an attempt to get free from being held still.
- ✿ Some dogs might completely freeze and remain very still instead – hoping you'll get the hint and stop right away and leave them alone. Freezing and tolerating being handled doesn't mean they're enjoying it, so if your dog does this it's important to recognise they're afraid and stop what you're doing!
- ✿ Some dogs might feel they have no other means of telling you to let them go than to growl or even snap if they feel very threatened when being handled.

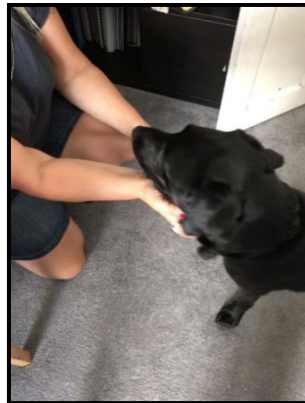
Respond appropriately to your dog's feelings!

There are some simple rules to follow to ensure that you introduce this type of handling in the best way, this will ensure that your dog remains cooperative, calm and happy. The key is to work with your dog in order to recognise the signs that they may use to tell you they are uncomfortable and know how to respond appropriately.

Our **Body Language** handout will help you become familiar with common signs of fears, so you can observe for any of these in your dog and learn how to assess how they are feeling about being handled. **If you notice any signs that your dog is becoming worried about how you are handling them, then stop and pause to consider how to make your handling easier for them** – such as reducing your speed, reducing the amount of time you are handling them and handling them in a gentler manner, with less physical contact or pressure at this point while they're learning to enjoy it!

You can help build a more positive association by talking in a calm voice and rewarding them with a tasty treat or game!

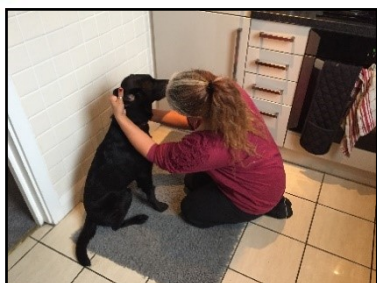
Introducing handling so your dog doesn't find it worrying



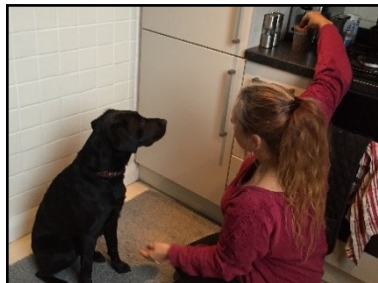
This dog likes being scratched under their chin

* Start where your dog feels comfortable

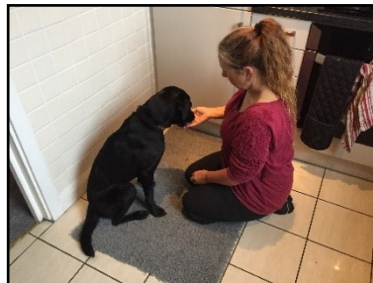
It will help to make your dog feel comfortable if you start to practice handling them in an environment that they are most comfortable in, because they're likely to feel safe here. Start to introduce touching them on a part of their body where they're used to being touched and enjoy it – this will be different for every dog so might be just behind their ears, their rump just in front of their tail, along their shoulders, or under their chin and on the front of their chest for example. Parts of your dog's body might be more sensitive than others – they might have a medical reason for this such as arthritis or infection, or they might just not ever have been handled like this before. Touching them in places they do find enjoyable will give your dog support and mean that you are starting off in a way that is not too difficult for them, so they're very likely to do well and feel confident during the session.



Owner touches their dog's ear...



...then takes a treat right away...



...and rewards their dog!

🌿 **Reward as you go along – make every step of the way enjoyable!**

Make being handled extra enjoyable by giving your dog tasty treats – something they really love eating – just after you have touched each part of their body. For example, touch their ear then remove your hand and give a yummy treat, and then repeat, touch their ear and then give them a treat. They will soon learn that having their ear touched means they're about to get a delicious treat and learn to see this as a good thing! But take it slow – they might only be comfortable being touched for a very brief moment to begin with, and that's fine! Just give the treat because they deserve it! If you're finding it fiddly then ask someone to help you – they can feed the treats each time just after you've gently and briefly touched your dog.

If your dog is struggling being handled at any part of their body, then start by calmly moving your hand towards them – without actually touching them at all – and then move your hand away again and give them a really yummy treat.

You should very gradually progress this by moving closer to your dog until you can touch them for a moment – but only when they are relaxed and not showing signs of being worried by your hand approaching. You can work on building up the length of time you can touch them once they are comfortable and more confident – remember going at your dog's pace means they'll trust you every step of the way!

🌿 **Be gentle, systematic and brief!**

Us humans are naturally tactile and use our hands for a huge number of daily activities and interactions – we're used to grabbing and holding! So, take extra care when handling your dog and different parts of their body by keeping all your handling slow, relaxed and drawn out using prolonged, calm movements. You can use the back of your hand for stroking for example, so you are unlikely to unconsciously grab your dog should they suddenly move.



Using the back of the hand means the owner is unlikely to suddenly grab their dog which might worry them

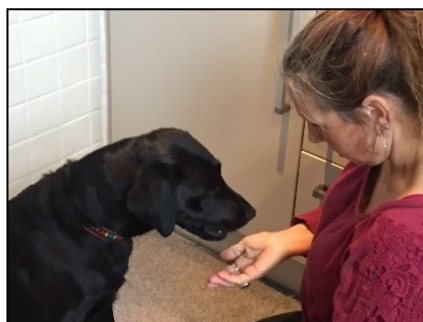
Dogs feel confident when they can predict what is going to happen so using a systematic approach to handling means they know what to expect and they know what is happening next. For example, if you always start examining your dog's face – their ears, ears and mouth – and then move along their body checking their chest, shoulders, front legs and paws, and then their sides, their back, hindlegs and paws and lastly their tail, then they will feel more comfortable every time. They'll know exactly what to expect, which will give them confidence.



The owner gently lifts their dog's leg...



...then takes a treat...



...and rewards their dog right away!

Make sure you handle each part of their body by moving it as naturally as possible – for example when lifting their legs to look at their paws, make sure you bend the leg as it would naturally to help make this as comfortable as possible for your dog.

And keep it brief – by touching them for just a second or two at a time and then having a break before moving to the next part of their body you're giving them breathing space in between!

*** Gradually increase the time you handle your dog**

Once your dog is readily accepting your brief handling, all over their body, you can gradually start to build up the length of time you are handling them at each point. Slowly just gently hold or stroke each body part for a teeny while longer each time you practice and always follow up with a tasty treat! It's a big deal for a lot of dogs to have us put our hands all over them so it's important to always reward them when we do! Remember, going at your dog's pace is key to them putting their trust in you! You can start to say the name of each part of your dog as you go along, which might help both of you to learn and remember the order you are going to examine them.

*** Stop if your dog seems worried**

It's really important that your dog knows that you will recognise their attempts at telling you they're becoming worried, and that you'll stop and not carry on – which might make them panic! Don't worry if they do become tense, or wriggly – just stop and relax. Think about which part of their body you were handling when they responded in this way and, after taking a break, start again at a part they do seem to enjoy being handled. There's no rush, and the more time you take to build their trust and confidence the happier they'll be!

*** Introduce new places and people**

Once you are able to handle different parts of your dog's body without them reacting in a worried manner, you can start to practice doing this in different places. This is important, because although your dog is now confident with you handling them within the comfort and safety of their own home, they might feel very differently if they injure themselves and have to be examined somewhere outside the house!

Whenever you are starting to examine them in a new place go right back to the beginning again and start by gently touching them systematically for a brief moment and giving them the extra tasty treat. It might feel as though you're repeating yourself unnecessarily however your dog will really appreciate you taking the time to go back to basics, as they will need to feel safe having this type of handling in a new place! Go at your dog's own pace and only move on to the next part of their body, or gradually increase the length of time for which you handle each part of their body, once they are confident and relaxed.

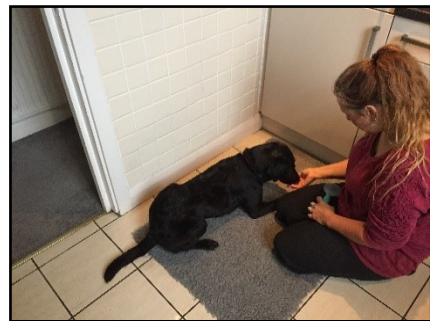
You can then introduce this handling game – being handled and receiving tasty treats for it – with different people! Always make sure the person is well-known to your dog beforehand and that they are happy to help you teach your dog. Give them clear instructions on how to touch your dog, exactly where and for how long – and remember to begin with this will just be a gentle fuss in a place where your dog really enjoys being fussed, and always followed by extra tasty treats!



The owner gently makes a brush stroke...



...then takes a treat...



...and rewards their dog right away!

*** Introduce grooming equipment gradually**

You might want to introduce grooming equipment to your dog – which is a good idea if you have a long haired or curly coated breed! Again, going at a pace at which your dog is comfortable every step of the way means they'll be confident all the way along!

Firstly, make sure you are using equipment that is best suited to your dog's coat type – as there are all sorts of brushes and combs available. You don't want to accidentally hurt your dog with a hard brush or comb if they move suddenly when you're introducing this kit, so starting with a very gentle, soft brush can be useful. Do exactly as when introducing your hands onto your dog's body – start by placing the brush onto your dog's body for a brief moment then removing it and giving them a very tasty treat. And

continue with the step by step process as slowly as you did when introducing your handling. If your dog shows any sign of worrying then stop and give them a break! Go back to a step at which they were relaxed and be prepared that for some dogs this might even be just holding the brush out towards them without actually touching them to begin with.

*** Take a regular walk to your vet practice**

Your vet and your dog will be forever grateful if you can help your dog to build up a really positive feeling about going into the veterinary surgery! So why not plan a weekly-walkies to your local vet? Pop in with some of your dog's favourite treats – or you could even take his dinner along and feed him there – and do nothing more than go inside, let your dog sniff around the waiting area and make it a fun experience for them. You will probably find that the reception team will be more than happy to come and give your dog a treat too, so once your dog is familiar with them they can even help you progress your handling training with other people too! Ask if you can pop your dog onto the weighing scales while you're there too – give your dog lots of treats when doing this so it isn't at all scary but a really pleasant experience for them. Be aware that other people and animals might be waiting to see the vet, so going at a quiet period might be useful as you'll have more space and time!

*** If your dog is struggling with learning to be handled**

Staying calm and relaxed at all times yourself will help, but this can be hard especially if your dog is wriggling around and even mouthing in an attempt to tell you they're not comfortable being handled. Simply stop and have a break, which you'll both appreciate. Only practice handling when you and your dog are both relaxed so that they won't pick up on any tension you might be feeling, and you will be ready to help them remain calm.

If your dog already has a severe or established fear of handling, or is already showing signs of aggression when being handled...

...contact your vet for a health check to rule out a medical problem that might be affecting your dog's behaviour. Your dog might benefit from a professionally qualified and experienced behaviourist providing advice on the gradual introduction of handling where a dog is showing a fearful response.

These resources have been created by Dogs Trust using the most up-to-date scientific-based understanding of dog behaviour and welfare needs and can be freely downloaded by anyone interested in learning more about understanding dog behaviour and training dogs.