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Puppy Behavior and Training – Handling and Food Bowl Exercises

What are handling exercises, and why might they be useful?

Exercises that use gentle and positive handling can help to increase the enjoyment and decrease any fear associated with handling and restraint. In addition, they provide a means for achieving a relaxed state, which might then be used if the dog begins to get excited or aroused. Verbal and physical exercises can and should also be used to help achieve a relaxed state. While the physical contact and attention you provide may be sufficiently reinforcing for most puppies, food treats can also be paired with handling to mark and reward the desirable response.



One important principle to always keep in mind is that the hand should always be an indication that something good is about to happen (e.g., the hand is a friend). This means that physical punishment and forceful handling must be avoided.

At what age should handling exercises begin?

Young puppies should be handled regularly, at least a couple of times a day. In fact, puppies that are handled each day from birth onward are generally faster to develop, more able to handle stress, and perhaps more social than those that have not been handled regularly. Therefore, obtaining puppies that have been reared in a home environment with regular handling would be very beneficial.

From the time you first obtain your new puppy, you will want to engage in frequent handling simply to provide regular and positive physical contact from family members. Over time, handling should progress to all parts of the body, including mild forms of restraint (such as a soft hand on the chest to stop forward movement), so that you gradually and positively accustom your puppy to procedures that might be needed later in life. For example, gentle handling around the muzzle, face and ears might help your puppy adapt to, and enjoy handling these parts of the body. Similarly, stroking and rubbing all areas of the body when the puppy is in the mood for affection, can help to accustom the dog to grooming, while handling the feet can help to prepare the puppy for nail trimming. Training the dog to be lifted and carried, or to roll over on its side or back for a tummy rub can also be valuable exercises to ensure safety in later handling. Remember to keep each handling exercise positive; a few food treats given with each exercise can be helpful. Ending the session when the puppy is relaxed and calm can help in establishing these handling exercises as one method of settling your dog when it gets excited. If there is any resistance, proceed more slowly and increase the value of the toys and treats used to distract and reinforce the puppy. Some goals for handling would be lifting, teeth brushing, brushing, bathing, cleaning ears, giving pills, and applying a leash and collar or head halter. If the rewards are sufficiently motivating the puppy should learn that each of these forms of handling is positive.

These exercises are not intended to force your puppy to accept handling; in fact, forceful handling such as pinning and rollovers are likely to lead to escape and defensive behavior, and fear and anxiety about further handling. Therefore each session should end on a calm note and must not proceed beyond a level that the puppy will not tolerate.

What type of exercises might help to get my puppy used to handling?

Body handling

You will do yourself and your new pet a favor by teaching your new puppy to allow you to handle his body. Throughout the life of your dog, there will be times that you need to restrain your dog, lift your dog or handle various parts of the dog's body. This may become necessary when its time to brush your dog's teeth, trim its nails, give medication, or clean its ears. Yet if you have never handled an adult dog these simple tasks could become impossible. Handling also serves to simulate the physical contact of the bitch, other puppies or another dog in the group. The young puppy must be taught to feel comfortable with this type of handling.

Gently handle your puppy daily. Pick a time when your puppy is calm, such as just after a nap. Do not try to start a body handling exercise when your puppy is excited, rambunctious or in the mood for play. Place the puppy in your lap (either while in a chair or for larger puppies while seated on the floor) and touch the feet, open the mouth, look in the ears and under the tail. All the while, praise your puppy for being good, even offer a few tasty food treats. Be sure to keep initial sessions very short, since you want your puppy to succeed and not struggle. If the session is too long you run the risk of the puppy struggling and getting free. This is not the message you want your puppy to learn. Gradually increase the amount of time you handle your puppy so that no struggle ensues. Soon the puppy will allow and perhaps anticipate these handling sessions. All family members should participate in this exercise. An adult should supervise young children. If you see any hesitance or reluctance on the part of the puppy, you will want to repeat the exercise until you can accomplish the handling without resistance. Do not punish, scold or reprimand your puppy for wiggling or even aggression during this exercise. Punishment will not decrease fear, arousal or anxiety about the exercise. It may make the puppy sit still or be quiet this time but it has not ensured future successes! Do the same exercises a little more gently or in a slightly different location, give some tasty treats for compliance, and progress gradually to more difficult situations. Never force the puppy to the point that it exhibits fear or attempts escape. On the other hand if you do not gradually overcome the resistance, the puppy may never allow the handling as an adult. Over time, your puppy should allow you to place pressure on the back of its neck while it is in a down position, to roll it onto its side, to grasp its muzzle like you might administer medication and to be lifted. These forms of handling should not be used for punishment.

Food bowl handling

Another important exercise is to acclimate your puppy to having his food and possessions touched by humans. Dogs in the wild may guard their food to prevent its loss, while that is not necessary in the home your puppy may have a natural, instinctive tendency to protect what it has. You need to teach the puppy that you are not going to take away the food and not give it back. Handle the food bowl while your puppy eats, pet and praise your puppy, give a special treat and every now and then lift the bowl, place in a special treat, and return it. Similarly, when walking past the puppy while it is eating, you can place a treat in its food bowl, or reach down, pat the puppy and give a treat. This should be an "A" reward. This way the puppy learns not only to tolerate intrusions and disturbance while it eats but is being conditioned that when people approach really wonderful treats are associated and the puppy will have a pleasant association with this situation. Once these lessons are learned a puppy is less likely to be startled and react aggressively should something unexpected happen when eating. If the treat you add is tasty enough, the puppy will pause when you



approach and anticipate that you may have something better! Families often worry about children being bitten by a dog that is eating; as much as good parenting should involve teaching the children to never approach a dog while eating, children may still approach a dog at meal time either intentionally or accidentally. If the dog has been taught to expect a treat, praise or toy when people approach then the dog is more likely to greet a child with curious enthusiasm than aggression. If any growling should occur you should seek professional guidance immediately. Punishment of growling will only ensure that this puppy becomes more aggressive. Realize a growl is dog communication for “if this continues, I will bite”; it is a warning and tells you how the dog feels. Punishment is not going to make him feel better about your approach. If there is competition with other dogs over food, the puppy should be fed separately or perhaps even in another room. Not all puppies will respond to these interventions, their desire to protect their food could be quite strong and is a natural, innate trait.

"Don't punish dogs for growling to protect food or toy items."

All physical reprimands must be avoided however, since they will tend to increase the anxiety about eating. Physical corrections for growling may be effective at stopping a dog from growling without changing his underlying emotion; in which case you have a dog that feels threatened but won't communicate by growling so when a bite occurs there was not a warning. Consultation with a veterinary behaviorist is recommended.

Most dogs will benefit from having their food provided inside toys that require chewing, rolling, pawing, shaking or flipping to release the food. Your dog may be just as possessive about these toys; however, since you will be giving a number of toys with smaller amounts at each meal time rather than a bowl filled with food, many dogs will allow you to give new toys in exchange for the empty toy. In time if you have the puppy sit or even come away from its toy and sit before you give the new food toy, the puppy may learn that you are the source of new food and toys, rather than a threat to removing toys. Therefore, feeding small amounts of food in toys, provides multiple possibilities to provide food as long as your puppy leaves its food toy and sits patiently for the next toy. Again if there are any threats or your puppy is not willing to leave its toy for a new one, you should proceed only with the use of a head halter for training and seek the guidance of a behaviorist if there is any possibility of injury.

Toy handling

You should also practice gently taking toys from the puppy. Quietly and calmly place your hand on the toy and tell your puppy “give” as you remove it from its mouth. Then say “thank you” or “good boy” with lots of praise and animation. Then return the object as you tell your puppy to “take it.” Repeat this training task multiple times daily in multiple locations. At times take the object and offer a really great treat. The value of the treat must far outweigh the value of the toy. Be careful not to overdo the exercise. The goal is for your puppy to anticipate that good things happen when you approach while he has a toy. Excessive repetitions of this may actually teach the dog to be protective. The puppy should always see you approaching with something better and the motivation should always be that there is more in it for him if he releases his toys to you.

"Quietly and calmly place your hand on the toy and tell your puppy 'give' as you remove the toy from its mouth."

If the puppy enjoys chasing the toy, you could also play a chase and retrieve game. It is generally best to schedule play times regularly throughout the day rather than allowing the puppy to initiate games of tug and chase. In this way, attention-seeking behavior is not reinforced, and toys can be used as a reward for desirable behavior. In fact, toy-handling exercises can be used to teach the 'give' command. If the puppy learns that something good comes when relinquishing objects, you should soon be able to handle any toy that your puppy has. Your puppy will learn that it is okay and even

desirable for you to handle its possessions, and that you will give them back. The puppy should then be unconcerned should you need to remove something from the mouth. Occasionally there are likely to be items the puppy really wants, such as very delectable food items or chew bones. If the puppy protects these items, lure the puppy away with another treat and go back and get the items. Avoid a confrontation; it will only make it worse in the future. Avoid giving those items to your puppy in the future.

What if my puppy resists these handling exercises?

All dogs need veterinary care, grooming and handling of their personal space. If this is taught to puppies by a calm, pleasant, positive approach then the benefits of the lessons described here will last a lifetime. Some puppies resist certain forms of handling and may try to escape or even become defensive. Although invasive or intensive forms of handling should initially be avoided, it should be your long-term goal to overcome this resistance through positive reinforcement and shaping. To achieve success, especially with puppies that resist, follow a few basic guidelines:

1. Begin these exercises when the puppy is in the mood, but not necessarily when the puppy is demanding affection or attention, as this might reinforce demanding and attention seeking behavior. Wait for a time when the puppy is calm and quiet, perhaps just as it is awakening from a rest time. In addition, if you give the puppy all the affection it wants, whenever it wants, then there may be times when it is resistant and doesn't want any more. Therefore the first rule of thumb is to use a "learn to earn program" where affection and social contact is given as a reward for desirable behavior. Try giving a "sit" or "lie down" command when the puppy seems to want attention and then give the affection as a reward. Another option is to call the puppy (e.g., come) or go to the puppy to give attention when it is resting quietly on the floor or when it is chewing on a favored toy. Be aware of any threats or anxiety however, as this might indicate emerging possessive behavior.

2. Ensure that the puppy is enjoying itself during petting and affection. Try to end your session with the puppy relaxed and still in the mood for more, rather than when the puppy resists and indicates that it has had enough.

3. Shape gradually more desirable responses by beginning with the type of handling that the puppy enjoys and craves (e.g., stroking the head, rubbing the belly) and then progress to other areas of the body such as around the muzzle, the back of the neck, the body, the legs and feet, the belly and around the tail.

4. At any point, if the puppy resists or objects, you should attempt to settle the puppy down and stop the exercises. While we do not want to force the puppy to accept something that it does not like, we also do not want the puppy to learn that escape or biting will be a successful way to end the session. A head halter might be considered for further training to ensure a successful conclusion to each session. You may give a sticky treat like peanut butter or squeeze cheese to help settle and focus your puppy so the lesson could continue. The treat should come at the same time as the handling. For example, you can wiggle his tail with one hand while simultaneously releasing cheese from the can from the other.

5. If you have encountered resistance during a previous session, determine the puppy's limits and use food treats or favored toys to distract the puppy as you begin to handle these areas. Once the pet associates the handling with something positive, you can proceed slowly, always ending on a positive note. Your goal is not that your puppy tolerates these exercises, but that he enjoys and looks forward to them.

6. Ultimately you will want to progress to procedures such as turning the dog onto its side, back or belly, lifting, brushing or combing the coat, brushing the gums and teeth, trimming the nails or even taking the dog's temperature. Therefore handling exercises should be designed to achieve these goals while the puppy is still young and manageable by progressing very slowly and using favored rewards for distraction and counter-conditioning whenever necessary, to ensure a positive outcome. Luring techniques may be used to help a puppy successfully get into side lying positions without force. Remember sessions should be short, puppies have short attention spans and tolerance.

7. Continue to progress by proofing your puppy against the types of handling that it may someday need to confront. At this point, verbal commands may also be useful. For example, lifting may be preceded by the "up" command and your dog can receive favored rewards while being carried. During a "down" exercise you might consider adding some light pressure downward on the neck or back (as might happen if a child were to rest against the dog). During standing the tail might be lifted or handled; during the sit the muzzle might be gently grasped; and during the sit, stand or down, gentle hugging might be practiced. While it is generally advisable to avoid these types of handling, as a rewarded exercise during training these forms of physical restraint can be valuable learning experiences. For adapting puppies to nail trimming and tooth brushing.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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