

HELPING YOUR PET TOLERATE HANDLING AND GROOMING

Being held, petted, mildly restrained and groomed should be enjoyable, or at least tolerable, experiences for any pet. Even unsocialized dogs and cats, or ones that come from feral backgrounds can learn to tolerate routine handling and grooming. It is much, much easier to accustom puppies and kittens to these activities than to work with adult animals that might have already had bad experiences.

The biggest mistake you can make is turning these interactions into a match of wills and believing that you have to “be dominant” over your dog, or that your cat must submit to you or else! If a pet has a bad experience the first time you bring out the brush, comb or nail clippers, he’ll remember it. This will only make grooming and handling more difficult as time goes on.

Instead, you want to create an expectation that being held and having body parts touched are enjoyable experiences. Start with whatever type of petting, handling, or grooming your pet will currently tolerate without being fearful or aggressive.

Brushing

For example, let’s say your cat or dog will allow you to lightly brush or comb him around his neck and shoulders, but won’t let you comb his hind-quarters or back legs. Start by brushing those areas your pet will allow and offer him several irresistible tidbits at the same time. It may be easier for one person to do the grooming and another to be in charge of the tidbits.

Move the brush a tiny bit farther toward your pet’s back legs than he would normally allow while putting several tidbits right under his nose. Rather than trying to feed your pet from your fingers, put the treats in your flat palm and let your pet eat them from there. Some pets may do better if you put the treats on the floor. Continue practicing with many brief sessions, each time working your way closer to those areas your pet doesn’t like touched.

Giving Pills and Brushing Teeth

Add more experiences. Open your pet’s mouth and put a treat in it. Use something you know your pet likes. This will help him become less upset when you need to look in his mouth or give him a pill or other medication. Run your finger over your pet’s teeth. This might be the first step in teaching him to tolerate tooth brushing.

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog and cat behavior.

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Nail Trims

If you've ever had pets that panicked when you tried to trim their nails you know how unpleasant, and even dangerous their behavior can be. It's much better if your puppy or kitten learns at a very young age that having their feet touched and held is not a bad thing. If a pet's first experience with a nail trim is a bad one, it can result in him hating nail trims for the rest of his life.

To help your pet tolerate nail trims, start with what your pet will allow. You may need to begin by merely picking up your pet's foot offering a tidbit with the other hand, and releasing his foot. Repeat this simple exercise until your pet is not anxious or struggling and gives signs that he is expecting a tidbit.

Next, hold or gently squeeze the paw while offering the tidbit. The next step might be to get your pet used to the feel of the metal clippers against his nails. Gently tap each nail on a foot with the clippers. Each tap should be followed by a tidbit. You may only be able to work with one foot, or perhaps even one nail per practice session. Keep these work sessions short so your pet doesn't get tired or frustrated. Tap each nail on all four feet before attempting to clip any nails. After tapping a nail, quickly trim the sharp tip, release the foot, and give your pet a tidbit. Repeat with each nail. This entire process may take 10 or 12 sessions, before you complete a full nail trim.

If your pet has had a bad experience, just the sight of the nail clippers may cause him to become upset. Practice as described above by just leaving the clippers lying around, and also with the clippers = treats approach. If you haven't cut nails before, ask your veterinarian to show you how so you don't hurt your pet.

What Not To do

Nail trims and other grooming procedures are never emergencies. Avoid having anyone hold your pet down or punish him to allow these procedures to be done. It's much better to sedate your pet if he requires grooming or nail trims until you have worked through this training process. If your pet has become intolerant of handling, read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on this topic.

Another option is a Calming Cap™, which is a hood for dogs that filters their vision. This seems to calm most dogs and may be quite helpful. Always make treats part of the nail trimming process, and not just rewards for good behavior at the end.

Practice Makes Perfect

Practice grooming and handling with your pet regularly - at least several times a week. If your pet only sees the brush, comb, or toothbrush every now and then, he won't become familiar and at ease with these tools and procedures. Many pet owners make the mistake of brushing their pet infre-

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quently, after the fur is matted and tangled, which guarantees the experience will be more difficult and unpleasant than regular, frequent grooming sessions.

If you expect your adult dog or cat will be groomed regularly, take him to the grooming saloon as a puppy or kitten to accustom him to the facility, staff, and procedures. See the article on socialization to learn more about how to structure these socialization visits. These visits should be brief and pleasant, rather than for a full grooming.

The time you spend practicing body handling and body care procedures will pay off big throughout your pet's life. Think how easy it will be if you have to pull a thorn out of your dog's foot, or clean your cat's ears if your pet has learned to relax and be still. It isn't fun for you or your pet if handling always becomes a wrestling match. If you work consistently with these exercises, you can avoid this unpleasantness.

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