



HELPING DOGS WITH TOUCH SENSITIVITY

Some dogs show sensitivity to being touched on certain parts of their bodies or in certain ways. Touch sensitivities may be the result of harsh handling or punishment, pain from a prior injury, or a lack of handling and socialization as a puppy. Though many dogs may just dislike being touched certain places, others will attempt to make it stop by freezing, growling, snapping, or biting.

Luckily, we can change dogs' responses to touch through a process called counterconditioning and desensitization. This process reprograms the dog's negative emotional response to touch to a positive one by pairing a pleasant thing (food) with something unpleasant (touch), starting with low levels of touch that he can tolerate and slowly working up to touching more sensitive parts of his body with more pressure and for longer durations.

General 'Rules' of Training

- Before starting, take your dog to the vet to rule out a medical explanation for the behaviors your dog is displaying. If your dog is in pain, any training you do will not lessen his discomfort.
- Find a delicious treat that your dog will only receive during this training. Try small pieces of hotdogs, chicken, or cheese. Cut them into very small pieces so your dog doesn't get full or sick when training.
- Start by touching your dog in an area in which he does *not* display any sensitivity. Touch here very briefly and then give him a treat, removing both hands once the treat is delivered. Continue this until the dog starts to catch on and look for the treat once he's touched. The dog will start to make the association 'touch = treat', and that touch is a good thing. Anytime the dog is being touched, he should be getting a treat, and once the touch stops, the treat should be gone.
- After several repetitions in one area, gradually move your touch closer to the sensitive location in small increments while delivering treats, being sure the dog is relaxed and anticipating treats before moving to the next step. As you progress, increase the amount of pressure and how long you're touching the dog's body. Only increase one of these at a time (i.e., relax your criteria for *time* as you increase *pressure*, and vice versa).
- Go slow! If you notice your dog is becoming uncomfortable or stressed during training sessions, you are progressing too quickly. Go back to a previous step where the dog is more comfortable. Signs of discomfort include becoming stiff or rigid, closing his mouth, avoiding eye contact, or moving away.
- If your dog bares his teeth, growls, or snaps, do not punish him for this behavior. He is trying to communicate to you that he is uncomfortable and wants you to stop. Punishing or scolding the dog will only make him more anxious or fearful, and teaches him to not give signals that he is uncomfortable, which can make him more likely to escalate to biting in the future.
- Plan to do short (~5 minute) training sessions every day in order to see results. Be sure to end each training session on a good note. If you notice the dog is getting stressed or frustrated, go back to a more comfortable place, give the dog a treat, and end the session. When you begin the next session, don't start where you left off; go back a few steps and work back up to where you left off last time, then continue on from there.

Animal behavior questions?

Contact our FREE Behavior Helpline!

402-905-3421 | bhelp@nehumanesociety.org | www.nehumanesociety.org/behaviorhelp

SAMPLE TRAINING PLANS

Dogs with Collar Sensitivity:

1. Touch the dog on the shoulder while giving him a treat. Repeat several (15+) times.
2. Touch the dog between the shoulder and collar area while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
3. Touch the dog lightly on the collar area for 1 second while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
4. Touch the dog lightly on the collar area for 3 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
5. Touch the dog lightly on the collar area for 5 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
6. Gently grab the dog's collar, holding for 1 second while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
7. Gently grab the dog's collar, holding for 3 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
8. Gently grab the dog's collar, holding for 5 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
9. Grab the dog's collar a little more firmly, holding for 1 second while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
10. Grab the dog's collar firmly, holding for 3 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
11. Grab the dog's collar firmly, holding for 5 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
12. Continue increasing time and pressure as you see fit.

Dogs with Paw Sensitivity:

1. Touch the dog at the top of the leg while giving him a treat. Repeat several (15+) times.
2. Touch the dog partway down the leg while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
3. Touch the dog lightly on the paw for 1 second while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
4. Touch the dog lightly on the paw for 3 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
5. Touch the dog lightly on the paw for 5 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
6. Gently pick up the dog's paw for 1 second while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
7. Gently pick up the dog's paw for 3 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
8. Gently pick up the dog's paw for 5 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
9. Repeat the previous three steps, squeezing the paw lightly.
10. Repeat the previous three steps, squeezing the paw a bit more firmly.
11. Continue as you see fit. Slowly introduce nail clippers or towels using the same procedure if your dog has issues with nail trims or having his paws wiped off.

Dogs with Ear Sensitivity:

1. Touch the dog on the shoulder while giving him a treat. Repeat several (15+) times.
2. Touch the dog between the shoulder and ear while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
3. Touch the dog just below the ear while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
4. Touch the tip of the dog's ear for 1 second while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
5. Touch the tip of the dog's ear for 3 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
6. Touch the tip of the dog's ear for 5 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
7. Gently pull the dog's ear back for 1 second while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
8. Gently pull the dog's ear back for 3 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
9. Gently pull the dog's ear back for 5 seconds while giving him a treat. Repeat several times.
10. Continue as you see fit. Slowly introduce ear drops or a cotton ball using the same procedure if your dog has issues ear cleanings.

Safety precaution: If your dog is biting you or has a history of biting, it is safest to consult a professional when attempting this training. Find a certified dog trainer or behaviorist (CPDT, CBCC, CAAB) that uses exclusively positive reinforcement training methods. Any training methods using punishment or pain (including devices like e-collars or tens units) will likely only make the dog's issues worse and make them even less safe to handle.

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