

Puppy Behavior and Training – Handling Exercises

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

Handling exercises are training lessons designed to help puppies relax and cooperate when being touched and handled. Your puppy will need to be handled for basic husbandry and good medical care; handling exercises help ensure that your puppy will be comfortable when receiving this necessary care.

Handling sessions can be designed to acclimate your puppy to a wide range of anticipated manipulations, including being brushed, bathed, and examined by a veterinarian. During these sessions, puppies develop a positive association with being handled as these manipulations are paired with tasty treats.

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Handling sessions should be short and fun. Limit the number of repetitions in a session, and be sure your puppy is eagerly but calmly eating treats as you practice.

Do not proceed with any handling if you notice your puppy is frightened. It is essential to be able to identify subtle signs of distress. Here are some signs that your puppy is not comfortable with the level of training:

- Squirms or struggles to get away
- Cowers or shows the whites of the eyes
- Whines or cries
- Mouths, nips, or tries to bite
- Leans away, turns away, or moves away
- Takes treats roughly or excitedly
- Stops taking treats
- Moves away or tries to hide when approached for a handling session (e.g., when he sees equipment like a harness or brush)



The structure of a handling program is as follows :

1. Create a handling goal for each session.
2. Break the goal down into many small steps that are easy to introduce.
3. Go at your puppy's pace without them feeling afraid or anxious.
4. Pair each baby step of the handling plan with something your puppy loves, such as treats and attention — learn what your puppy loves!
5. Eventually, reach the goal of your puppy allowing and looking forward to the handling experience.

Let's take the example of helping a puppy enjoy being brushed. To begin, let your puppy nibble some snacks, and then touch him with the soft side of the brush. Repeat two to three times, then end the session—you can have another short session later that day. If the back side of the brush is well tolerated and your puppy continues to eat happily, you can try touching him to the bristled side of the brush.

However, if your puppy stops eating treats, take a break, play with your puppy and then either upgrade to better treats or practice with something softer than a brush, such as a mitten or soft cloth. Always end on a positive note, with your puppy eating the snacks. A sign that you are progressing at a good pace will be if you take out the brush and your puppy runs over—this tells you that he is eager to participate.

While the basic process is the same, each puppy will need a personalized approach. If your puppy struggles or shows signs of distress, you need to make the manipulation easier.

Should I practice handling exercises in any specific location?

It can be helpful to set up a workstation for handling exercises. Using a specific location will allow your puppy to predict that you plan to do some manipulation (brushing, checking for ticks, applying topical medication) and that he can expect a reward for calm cooperation. A rubber-topped grooming table is an ideal handling station, though you can also use a non-slip or yoga mat. Be sure to use a surface that provides traction for your puppy.

What other equipment do I need for the handling exercise?

You will need tasty treats. It can be helpful to use treats that can be licked so that they last longer. Examples include baby food and canned puppy food. These soft treats can be placed on a spoon or lick mat or put into a Kong or squeeze tube for easy dispensing.

A second person is not exactly 'equipment', but having an assistant can be helpful. That way, one person can feed the puppy while the other does the handling.

What is the first type of handling to practice?

Since many manipulations require that a puppy remain still, teaching a puppy to tolerate gentle restraint is very helpful. Though puppies can eventually be taught to stand completely still to earn treats, there may be an occasion where a person, such as a veterinary assistant, will need to gently hug your puppy or place a hand on your puppy's collar to prevent him from moving away.

To get started, lure your puppy onto the workstation. Stand, sit, or kneel beside the puppy and begin to feed your puppy. If you don't have a helper, present your puppy with the soft food and let your puppy start licking. If you use a grooming table, you must lift your puppy onto the table. At that point, you should immediately begin treating your puppy, without adding any other handling, until your puppy consistently and immediately relaxes and takes treats when placed on the table.

You should expect your puppy to quickly learn that the workstation is where to get snacks. Next, while your puppy is busy eating, gently place one arm around the puppy to prevent her from walking away. Squeeze very gently, then when you're ready to stop touching, ask the treat person to stop feeding. If you're working alone, use one hand on the puppy and the other to present and withdraw the treats.

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The goal is to associate the manipulation with something positive. In this case, the start of the touch is the on-switch for treats, and the stop of touch is the off-switch for treats. Repeat this exercise several times until the puppy starts to look for food when you reach toward them. This means they are starting to anticipate something nice when you reach toward them! Good! Gradually increase the pressure of your hug, perhaps add a second arm to stabilize the puppy further, and even practice lifting the pup slightly off the ground. Keep the treats within easy reach of the puppy's nose, so he stays in one place. The treats need to follow the puppy's nose up if you lift the puppy.

Note: If your puppy stops eating when you touch him, or if he snarls or growls, do not continue. Instead, consult with a professional such as a veterinary behaviorist, as you will need to use a modified strategy.

What other kind of handling does my puppy need to learn to accept?

Consider the types of situations that your puppy might encounter as an adult dog. Ideally, every puppy should be exposed to handling that prepares them for:

- **Basic husbandry.** Your puppy can learn to tolerate a brush, a towel wipe, having her teeth brushed, and having her nails trimmed.
- **Home medical care.** Your puppy can learn to receive oral medication and eye and ear drops.
- **Veterinary examinations and injections.** It can be helpful to teach your puppy to wear a basket muzzle and an Elizabeth collar, as these devices are sometimes needed.
- **Clothing and gear.** Your puppy can learn to wear collars, harnesses, and protective gear like coats and boots.

When should I start puppy handling exercises?

As soon as your puppy has become comfortable in your home, you can introduce handling exercises. In fact, without your even trying, you will probably begin teaching your puppy that some handling is safe and yields rewards. You probably already taught your puppy that standing still to have a leash or harness applied will bring an opportunity to get outside to play.

Choose a time when your puppy is interested but calm. After a meal or after a nap may be a good time to work with your puppy. Avoid practicing handling exercises when your puppy is feeling super active or wants a big game of vigorous play. Trying to do calm handling exercises with a highly excited puppy will frustrate everyone involved.

What if my puppy is wiggly?

Remember: Dogs do what works. If puppies learn early that wiggling means we will immediately let go, we can teach them to be very wiggly instead of being still. If your puppy is showing some minor wiggling, start by waiting three to five seconds without moving your hands away. When your puppy stops wiggling, remove your hands.

If your puppy is more wiggly or distressed after three to five seconds rather than calming down, end the session and try again later with a lower intensity style of handling before working up to more constrictive handling and restraint. If your puppy shows significant signs of stress, as described above, your puppy needs a more detailed handling plan from an expert. Seek professional guidance as soon as possible to help your puppy become more comfortable with handling.

What if my puppy stands like a statue and won't take treats?

If your puppy is normally active and loves treats but stands like a statue and will not eat treats while you're doing handling exercises, this is a sign that your puppy is stressed. First, try making the handling a little easier, but if your puppy still will not eat, end the session and consult with a professional who can design a modified training plan.

What if my puppy yelps, growls, nips, or hides?

Hiding, yelping, growling, and nipping are signs of extreme distress. Handling should be discontinued, or there is a risk of creating long-term fear of being handled. Puppies showing this level of distress need extra help. Seek guidance from an experienced professional to help you get your puppy more comfortable with the needed handling exercises. Never punish or scold your puppy for this behavior.

What about scary things like nail trimming?

Nail trims are scary for many dogs. The nails are a sensitive body part. In addition, many people are worried that they might cut a nail too short and cause pain or bleeding. A nail grinder is an option to consider. A puppy needs many skills to quietly accept nail care. Your puppy must learn to:

- Hold still
- Like the sight of the nail clippers or grinder
- Accept having a paw and nail held still
- Accept the sound of the clippers or grinder
- Accept having a nail touched by the equipment without the sound
- Accept all of these things put together



Breaking down the nail care process into these many small parts and practicing each part until the dog is ready to do the entire sequence usually takes a few weeks or even months to achieve. Don't rush the process. Observe your puppy's body language to determine when your puppy is ready to advance to a more difficult step.