

Handling and feeding exercises for puppies

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The first goal (level 1) of handling exercises is to teach the puppy to tolerate and enjoy handling by family members and friends. The second goal (level 2) is to teach the pet to tolerate more intensive, firm, or unfamiliar forms of handling that might be necessary for restraint, grooming (including nail trimming, ear cleaning, and combing), teeth brushing, veterinary care, or that might arise in greeting or play with new people or children. If the puppy can be trained to associate these forms of handling with treats and play, it may not become problematic when the puppy experiences them later. The goal is to “proof” the puppy as much as possible to prevent it from getting upset if it is handled roughly or caught by surprise.

Similarly, feeding exercises are intended to help the pet accept and enjoy approach and handling during feeding.

Precautions

1. Avoid any type of handling during these exercises that causes the pet to become agitated or anxious.
2. If you observe threats or aggression during any of these exercises, seek guidance from your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist, qualified applied animal behaviorist, or a trainer before proceeding.
3. Reaching for the puppy should always be positive. Hand contact must always be considered a friendly (nonaversive) gesture. Never hit the pup or roughly grab its muzzle or neck.

Handling exercises

A. Level 1: teaching tolerance

The goal of handling exercises is to accustom the puppy to accept and enjoy handling by friends and family members.

1. Begin by only working with the puppy when it is calm.
2. Gently inspect its ears, mouth, paws, belly, and haircoat.
3. Initially interact for only 1 second and end with praise or food (before the pup’s dinner time is a good time to do this).
4. Anticipate the puppy’s mood and reaction and always stop before the puppy starts to object.
5. Repeat the exercises frequently, gradually lengthening each interaction time.
6. Always praise the puppy when it relaxes while being handled.
7. Progress slowly enough to avoid eliciting resistance, aggression, or anxious behaviors. Don’t ever force the puppy to endure handling, especially if it seems uncomfortable or stressed.

B. Level 2: helping puppies to tolerate more intensive handling

1. Act calm and cheerful; offer food or a toy.
2. Speak quietly, and then gently touch, pet, stroke, or massage various areas of the body and around the collar while giving the pet food or a toy as well as quiet praise.
3. Gradually increase the intensity of touching, pushing, patting, and grasping different areas of the body (e.g., face, feet, muzzle, ears) as the puppy gets more used to it. Never cause pain or discomfort to the puppy!
4. Always praise the puppy and intermittently give favored treats whenever it allows handling.
5. Start with short sessions, anticipate the puppy’s attention span, and stop before the puppy gets tired of the exercise.
6. Consider your dog and lifestyle and adapt and progress with your handling exercises (gentle, positive, reward association) to what the puppy might one day be expected to encounter (e.g., brushing the teeth, lifting and carrying, bathing, grooming, cleaning ears, wiping feet, nail trimming).

Feeding exercises

Food bowl handling is intended to teach the puppy to feel comfortable and even learn to enjoy the presence of people while it is eating or near its food bowl.

A. Stay with the puppy after you put down the food bowl. Give quiet praise while it is eating.

B. Food bowl handling (teach that the hand is coming to give, not to take away).

1. Quietly walk by the puppy while it is eating and drop a piece of canned food, meat, or cheese-flavored treat into the food bowl. When your puppy is happy with you doing this, then ask visitors to do the same.
2. Occasionally reach down toward the bowl and put a food treat in it.
3. Place the bowl in your lap or on the floor in front of you. Feed the puppy from the bowl. Handle the food, gently pet the puppy. Act cheerful, but talk quietly.
4. Take the bowl away. Put a highly desirable food treat in the bowl, and then immediately give it back.
5. Gently touch and handle the puppy while putting a food treat in the bowl.

Caution: These exercises are *only* for young, friendly puppies; if your pet is older, exceptionally shy, fearful, or aggressive do not do these, but contact your veterinarian or a behaviorist for help.