

Typical Counterconditioning

Let's say you want your dog to respond happily to having her foot touched. The sequence goes like this:

Touch – treat – wait at least 20 seconds

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Don't always make the wait period the same length. Varying the time between repetitions will make the relationship of the action to the treat more clear.

Most important, the touch should predict the food. Get it backwards and you can turn the presentation of the food into a warning. So touch, then treat, then wait a while. Deliver the food in a timely manner, but don't startle the dog with it; a gap of up to about a second between the touch and the treat is ok.

Keep the food somewhere easily accessible where the dog cannot get it. In a bowl on the counter works or in a loose pocket or treat pouch. Make sure you can get a piece out smoothly and efficiently with minimal fuss. If you need to have it in your hand already to get the timing right, keep that hand out of sight or still until after you touch.

It's also important to start with a version of the handling that the dog is ok with. (This is the desensitization part.) If your dog panics when his feet are handled, you could grab a foot and give a treat a hundred times, but the dog might not change his mind about foot handling. You have to start off in a situation where the dog can keep his wits about him. (This state is sometimes called "under threshold".) If he hates having his foot grabbed, start by reaching towards him but stopping before getting to his foot, then giving him a treat. If even that's too much, start by sitting down next to him (then treat) or looking at his foot (then treat).

After the dog looks happy about or at least like his anticipating a treat as a result of that action, you can progress to something a little closer to your goal. You can go from looking at the foot to reaching towards it to touching it lightly to touching it a little more firmly to a longer touch to a tiny bit of paw manipulation, etc.

Each step may take many repetitions, over a number of days, especially if your dog has a history of finding touch unpleasant. Or the process may go very quickly. Whatever the rate of progress, if you are careful never to rush ahead of the dog, these sessions can be a very pleasant experience for him.

I suggest you pick one type of handling at a time to work on. Whatever you choose, repeat each step until you see a positive difference in your dog's response. Once you have done that successfully you may want to branch out and make other types of handling more enjoyable for your dog.

Excerpt from Remember Me by Eileen Anderson