

Nail Clipping

This lesson is for anyone who has a dog that puts up a fight to have his nails clipped. You are going to condition him to actually be happy (or, at least tolerant) when those clippers come out, because you are going to desensitize him to them, and use classical conditioning to make him start to drool when he sees them. Yes, it will take a little time to do, but if you count up all the minutes spent fighting with a dog over nail clipping, in the long run you will save hours & hours.

I'm going to use, as an example, a dog who is upset upon even seeing the clippers. Those of you with less of a problem may be able to skip the first few steps. But they wouldn't hurt!

First, just bring out the clippers and lay them down. Do nothing with them, just let them lie there. Have them in a spot where the dog can't help but notice. Leave them out for a few days so the mere sight of them is no longer so upsetting.

Next step is to get him to touch them! Bring the clippers over, lay them down near your dog, and lay several pieces of the best imaginable treat down near them. Please forget even using any commercial treat - save some of your roast beef for this. It also helps if your dog hasn't had dinner yet, so the treats are all the more tempting. Relax and let him think about it - most dogs will go get the treats. If yours won't, then move them farther away until he will. Repeat this, getting closer & closer each time until you are placing the treats directly on the clippers.

Now, sit down near the clippers & have your dog sit near you, too. Point at the clippers and say "touch." (This will be easier if you have taught the Targeting lesson). You might have to hold a treat on the clippers to get an accidental touch at first. But when he touches it (accidentally or not), C&T, giving a jackpot & praise enthusiastically. Repeat again & again, until he is readily reaching out to touch the clippers for you.

The next step is to get him to accept having his nails touched by the clippers. Notice I said touch - not clip. That comes later. Sit down and have your dog lie down next to you. Have really good treats in your hand or a handy bowl (an assistant to give the treats is very helpful here). Slowly bring the clippers over to one of his front paws and gently touch one nail with them. If he yanks his paw out of the way, tell him "Too bad" and look away for a few moments. Let him be bummed out for a minute about the lost opportunity for an extraordinary treat. Then try again. When he finally holds still for one nail to be touched, C&T! Do again & again until he understands what his job is (to hold steady). If he really has a hard time not pulling his paw away, don't reward for that. Instead, C&T if you can get, say, within a couple of inches. And slowly get closer & closer until you are actually touching the nail. Practice with this for a few sessions. One nail touch - C&T. Another nail touch - C&T. When that is no longer a big deal, then do two nail touches - C&T. Then 3 nail touches - C&T. Whenever he has mastered a step, you "up the ante" by requiring more from him in order to earn his treat.

When you can touch all the nails in his paw before giving a treat, he is ready for actual clipping. However, be sure that he is accepting the touching on all four of his paws! Keep sessions short, especially for a young puppy. Do one foot, give the treat then go play. Later do another, etc. You progress with actual nail clipping as you did with the touching. Snip a teeny bit of one nail - C&T (if he holds steady). And slowly up the ante until you can clip an entire pawful of nails before giving a treat. My friend Susan was having to sit on her puppy to clip his nails. A few days of this (several sessions per day), and now he offers his paw to her when he sees the clippers! My thanks to her for coming up with this step-by-step way of doing the desensitization.

It is usually best to trim your dog's nails just a little bit about once a week to keep them short. If you allow them to grow long, the quick (the tender part inside) actually grows longer & you will be stuck with long nails that are noisy & can cause physical problems for the dog if they are extreme. If you are really unsure which part of the nail to clip, please ask your vet to show you (preferably on a dog that is relaxed!).

Remember to take it slowly - let your dog tell you by his acceptance when to progress to the next step.

Other tricks to try include having a helper rub his belly (if he likes that, of course) while you are clipping. I am also having great luck using a nail grinder which you can get from pet supply stores.

Happy clipping!

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*using positive methods to teach people how to teach their pets!