

Developing the Puppy/Dog's Tolerance to Handling and Restraint

(In a perfect world you would begin this desensitization to being touched and held right from the start of your puppy's life. But if you didn't know to do this or you have adopted an older dog, it is never too late.)

You need to handle your puppy on a daily basis. Normal health care both at home and at the vets requires that your dog atleast tolerate and hopefully enjoy being touched and restrained. When the puppy is accepting your touch readily, you are ready to advance to more restraining holding and touching.

Most pups will have problems with being handled at first. The key to success is not giving up when your puppy struggles or cries. This will simply encourage (reinforce) the struggling, crying behavior and then your puppy will struggle more and cry louder next time you attempt restraint. Eventually, your puppy will simply not accept any handling and may bite or growl anytime you attempt the type of handling he wants to avoid. Dogs never hold each other, watch them play and notice that whenever one dog feels controlled by the other dogs body, he will get panicky and fight to get free.

Follow this sequence:

STOP:

The first exercise involves handling the puppy around the face and neck. Begin with your puppy sitting and facing you. Hook your fingers into the sides of the collar and bring your thumbs and remaining fingers up to the puppy's head or muzzle. Gently stroke and rub all around the face. If the puppy starts to struggle, firmly freeze your hands on the pup's face and say "stop". Remain calm and still.

As soon as your puppy stops struggling or whining, praise softly and begin again. Do not let go of the puppy unless he is calm. Short sessions should build to longer sessions over a week's time.

INVERSION & SETTLE:

This exercise is another way of introducing restraint to your puppy. Many people feel that since their puppy will roll over on its back for petting, then they have a puppy that will accept inversion. This is not necessarily so. The difference between the two is that inversion will be YOUR idea, which often makes it less than fun to the puppy! Teach your puppy that you will do these exercises when you feel like it, not when he does!

Begin by first reviewing the "stop" exercise. Your puppy is familiar with this and will be reassured and also alerted to the start of a handling session. After reviewing "Stop" for a couple of minutes.

Gently turn your puppy so he is sitting with his back to you. You should be sitting on the floor. Now, stretch your legs out in front of you, forming a "V" with them. Support your puppy firmly as you lay him sidewise and then turn him so his feet are in the air and he is on his back. His head should be in your lap, and your legs remain firmly supporting his body between them.

If your puppy struggles, give your "stop" command and firmly hold him with one arm under his front legs, and your legs firmly holding. As soon as he relaxes a little, praise lightly and calmly rub his stomach. Handle the feet a little. If he struggles, repeat "stop" and freeze him in place as in above. Continue handling gently until your puppy relaxes. This is the *settling* - the puppy listens to "stop" and relaxes.

Release with a release command such as, "all done" and praise. Practice this exercise as well as the "stop" exercise everyday for a few minutes. Soon your puppy will relax as soon as you invert him. You can use this position for checking toenails, and general skin checks.