

Nail Trimming for Sensitive Dogs

In an ideal world, we would only have well-socialized and well-handled puppies to shape for calm nail trimming. But in the real world there are dogs who for many reasons don't like their feet handled. So we need to begin a desensitization program for these dogs to be successful.

If the dog is very fearful of the clippers, first begin by sitting in a known environment with the clippers in your hand the sofa or your favorite lounge chair. Let your body language reflect a calm ordinariness. Hold the clippers in your hand and have a bag of treats and the clicker ready to go.

Let dog come to check out what you have in your hand, and if he reaches out, sniffs at the clippers, click and treat. Move clippers around on your lap, hold them out in your hand, click and treat for any interaction.

Squeeze clippers, activating them, and click and treat for the dog not balking. If dog balks when clippers are activated, just ignore the dog. When dog, from your peripheral vision, is no longer worried (throwing calming signals), squeeze clippers again and quickly click and TOSS treat to dog. Continue squeezing clippers and rapidly click and toss treats.

Do this for however long it takes the dog to realize you are holding something that he doesn't need to fear. The open bar/closed bar is good here, as Jean Donaldson explains. When the clippers are in hand, the bar is open and treats flow fast. When the clickers are put away, treats stop.

If the dog mainly stresses on a grooming table, when his feet are picked up, toes manipulated, now is the time to start desensitizing him to this. Take a day or two to practice just putting the dog in the grooming noose, if necessary, and clicking him for allowing you to spread his toes. Don't attempt to clip a nail until the dog is no longer showing stress over having his legs lifted, his toes spread and manipulated.

If you don't use a grooming table for nail clipping, and use your lap instead, with the dog lying on its back or side, then work on getting the dog comfortably in that position while you click and treat for calmness. Pick up the clippers and hold them in the palm of your hand, and slowly touch the dog's body with the clippers. C/T for all quiet behaviors. Then activate clippers while still rapidly reinforcing calm and quiet.

Don't attempt to clip nails until the dog is not stressing around the presence of the clippers. Some dogs only begin stressing once the clippers are activated. Practice desensitizing to the sound of that sliding metal which probably indicates to a dog that something stressful or something painful is coming.

Know your dog anatomy well, and be sure you are prepared before you do an actual cut on the nail. If you cut too high - into the quick of the nail then you'll have a much harder time gaining his confidence and will be back to square one. For the desensitization program, you truly need to make certain each experience in the presence of the clickers is non-stressful, non-painful.

Work on getting the dog, in whichever position--upright, back or side--to allow you to flex and manipulate the leg freely. Hold the leg with a bit of firmness, but still maintain the relaxed, flexibility of the leg. If dog balks at this, work on c/t for just letting you flex legs, then for letting you manipulate toes, press on nails. When the dog is relaxed and not fighting your touch and hold, and he can handle having the clippers rubbed on his body, on his legs, touching his feet, then you can begin to actually nip off a bit of nail.

If you can get a helper, it will really make it easier. The helper can click and treat as you direct, while you use both hands to clip and manipulate the leg and foot.

I often use a bit of light TT Touch & massage to get the dog even more relaxed in between manipulating toes and readying myself for that first clip. When the dog is really relaxed, pick up the foot and clip just a tiny bit off the nail. C/T. Release foot, do a bit of touching, hands-on-massage for a few seconds, then quietly slide your hand down the dog's leg and lift his foot again. Whistle a happy tune, and clip another nail. If dog begins to stress, back off and ask for a few behaviors the dog likes to offer, c/t for them. Then go back to work again, IF the dog is not stressing.

If there is any hesitation, don't attempt to do all the nails the first day! What's important is that each time he is to have his nails clipped, that it be a very GOOD experience for him. You're reprogramming him here, and it may take a while. Let the dog's observable behaviors guide how much you can do at any one time. Set the dog up for success and build in as small of increments as necessary.

I've noticed that if I up the criteria too fast, then both the dog and I lose. So I'm very careful to strongly reinforce the behaviors I want before I actually tackle the clipping task. The little extra time it takes can go a long ways to shaping JUST the behaviors you do want for foot clipping.

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Plus an additional tip from Laura Van Dyne:

When you get to this point, try something I got at a John Rogerson Seminar. Use kitchen matches and hold one so it sticks out of the hand holding the dog's paw. Now clip off the tip of the match. The sound is perfect! BUT you'll never, ever quick a kitchen match. They don't bleed either! Once you can snip a kitchen match for every single toe, you are ready to start snipping the real tips.