



Teaching Dogs to Enjoy Grooming

Some dogs seem to find it naturally pleasant to be brushed and combed. This is pretty intuitive for humans – some of us like having our hair done and having other similar procedures performed on us. Some dogs may like the attention but be less keen on the procedure. Many dogs, even if they like brushing, don't like other grooming procedures, such as nails, baths and blow-dries. And some dogs find all grooming frightening or irritating.

The best possible scenario to teach grooming is prevention: practice on puppies before there's a problem. The best technique to accomplish this is classical conditioning. For example, brushing predicts chicken, or a bath predicts 10-minutes of play with a favorite toy. Clip one or two nails before loading the dog into the car for his trip to the dog park.

Correct execution of classical conditioning is critical to success. There are three rules.

Rules for Good Classical Conditioning

- 1) Order of Events. The thing you're trying to condition must start before – not after and not at the same time as – the thing you're using to condition it. For instance, if you're trying to train a dog to like the feeling of nail clippers touching her nail, touch her nail first and then give a piece of chicken. Don't feed the chicken before touching and don't start feeding the chicken as you touch.

This is an area where our intuitions can fail us. Many people feel that in order to “form an association,” the best possible procedure would be to do the two things at exactly the same time. This is incorrect and can result in no conditioning whatsoever. Classical conditioning is more about *anticipation*, animals learning *tip-offs* to important events by virtue of their predictive value. Tip-offs aren't useful during or after, only before. The first event in a classical conditioning procedure says “here it comes...” and the second event is It.

- 2) Strong (preferably 1:1) correlation. Don't have one thing without the other. For example, if you're conditioning a dog that after the hairdryer comes on, you supply a steady stream of bits of liver, don't expose her to the hairdryer without the liver or to liver without the hairdryer. This 1:1 ratio is especially important the first few times the dog experiences the hairdryer. When an animal perceives something for the first time, they notice it a bit more. It's as though they ask, “hmm, this is a new thing, what does it mean?” And, if you strongly answer, “well, it means LIVER” the information is catalogued. If the answer the first time is “well, it means nothing much” or, worse, “it means YOU'LL BE HELD STILL AND BLOW-DRIED,” this gets catalogued. So it pays very much to capitalize on “first times” – they are opportunities not to waste.
- 3) Rule out competing tip-offs. The real world is messier than a psychology laboratory. We think we're teaching a dog that being combed means cheese cubes but she may be focusing on other things than the combing. Maybe “bait pouch means cheese.” Or the trainer thinks the dog is attending to the sequence “foot trim predicts chicken,” but the dog is cataloguing “reaching for the crinkly plastic bag predicts chicken.” This “robs” our thing (combing or trimming) of its predictive value. To better isolate your desired thing

as The Predictor, spend some time during training sessions with competing tip-offs present but without supplying the cheese or chicken or whatever ammo you're using. Reach for the pouch but don't give any cheese. Let the dog smell the cheese but don't give any. Crinkle the bag but don't give any chicken. After a few minutes, do a bit of combing and only then actually give the dog some cheese. This way the comb is the best tip-off the dog has that cheese is coming. What we're after is the dog learning, "Oh! I get it now! It's the COMBING! The combing makes the cheese start, not the little pouch!"

Finally, it's important to start very easy and be generous. Build a training plan that starts with brief combing followed by several pieces of cheese. Gradually increase the amount of combing and its intensity. Ditto trimming, brushing, blow-drying or anything else. In dogs with existing problems, one must proceed even more slowly, starting with just showing the dog the implement – such as the comb – before proceeding to touching the dog with it, and finally gradually introducing actual combing.

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