

Teaching Dogs to Love Having Their Toenails Trimmed*

By Dr. Sophia Yin

OVERVIEW

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of **counterconditioning** with **desensitization**.

With **classical counterconditioning** we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with **desensitization**, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With **operant counterconditioning**, we train the pet to perform a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet to remain stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

Toenail trims should not be a traumatic event. There's no need to forcefully hold down a puppy to keep him from struggling for this procedure. Use classical and operant counterconditioning techniques to help the puppy easily accept having his nails trimmed.

Part 1: Classical Counterconditioning: Train the dog to associate foot handling with treats.



Fig.A, B, Step 1: First get the dog used to having his feet touched using classical counterconditioning. It might be easiest to place the puppy on his back on your lap. Handle his feet while giving treats. Then stop handling and stop giving treats simultaneously. Repeat. Both puppies and adult dogs can be trained to enjoy lying on their back before you train them to enjoy the toenail trim. You may opt to train adult dogs to lie on their side for this procedure or remain seated.

*To see video depicting this protocol go to www.AskDrYin.com.

This page is excerpted from, *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats*, by Dr. Sophia Yin. (www.nerdbook.com)

For more information about animal behavior, go to www.AskDrYin.com, where you can view free and subscription-based videos that provide step-by-step behavior modification instructions.

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Part 2: Operant Counterconditioning: Rewarding after the dog holds still for handling.



Fig.C



Fig.D

Fig. C, D, Step 2: Switching to operant counterconditioning, now handle the feet without giving treats. As soon as you stop touching the feet, reward the puppy for holding still. If needed, you can add an intermediate step where you pair treats with foot handling 1 or more seconds after you start handling the feet.

Part 3: Adding the toenail trimmers.



Fig.E



Fig.F

Fig. E, F, Step 3: Add the toenail trimmers. Clip one or two nails and then reward for calm behavior before he struggles. If you have 2 people, you can introduce the nail trimmers in step 1 using classical counterconditioning.

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