

Training Dogs to Love Getting Vaccinations and Other Injections

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.

Part 1: Training dogs to associate skin-handling with treats.



Fig.A, Step 1: Start by holding or pinching the dog's skin while feeding him a treat. The goal is to have him ignore the pinching and eat the entire time, so be sure you're not pinching hard enough to distract him from the treat.



Fig.B, Step 2: When he's finished with the treat, pull away your feeding hand and pinching hand. Then repeat the procedure. The puppy should learn to associate skin handling with treats.

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: Switching to rewarding for calm behavior when skin is handled.



Fig.C, Step 3: When the pup stays calm no matter how rough you are or where you grasp the skin, you can either vaccinate him now or try some operant counterconditioning first. To continue training with the latter, grasp the skin for several seconds.



Fig.D, Step 4: Then release the skin and immediately follow with treats as long as he has remained still. This way, he learns that holding still while you grasp the skin leads to treats. Use a clicker or “yes” to mark the good behavior if the puppy is already familiar with this type of training. If he reacts to handling, go back to step 1 or modify step 1 by pairing the treat with handling 1 second after you start handling.

Part 3: Giving the injection.



Fig.E, Step 5: If the pup is at all afraid of syringes, place food (try peanut butter or canned cheese) on the syringe and let him lick it off. When he consistently tries to lick the syringe as soon as he sees it, whether or not there's any food on it, you know he associates it with good things.



Fig.F, Step 6: Now place some treats on the floor for him to eat while you grasp his fur and poke his skin with the capped syringe. You can also distract him with food when giving actual vaccinations or other injections.

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