

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Handling and Touch Sensitivity

Some pets may be sensitive to having parts of their body touched, being petted in certain spots, or being picked up. There are a number of reasons they may feel this way: a lack of proper socialization when they were young, generalized anxieties, medical reasons, pain, or a negative experience in the past. Luckily, there are easy ways to help dogs to feel more comfortable when being touched or handled.

There are two techniques that can be practiced: **desensitization** and **counterconditioning**.

Desensitization

Desensitization diminishes an animal's emotional response to a stimulus after repeated exposure to it. This is achieved in small increments and repetition, slowly and gently exposing a dog to a scary or uncomfortable stimulus until, over time, it becomes less scary or less uncomfortable – the dog becomes less sensitive to the stimulus.

Counterconditioning

Counterconditioning is the process of replacing an animal's unpleasant emotional responses to a stimulus with a more pleasant one through the use of classical conditioning. Generally, high value treats or foodstuffs (yummy food your dog loves) are paired with the unpleasant stimulus (in this case, "touch"). Over time they will develop a more positive feeling to being touched.

Desensitization and counterconditioning work together to decrease a dog's sensitivity to the thing they do not like, while at the same time turning the negative associations they have with that thing to positive ones.

Here is a general guide to using desensitization and counterconditioning techniques to on something a lot of dogs are uncomfortable with – having their feet touched. This can be used for any type of handling sensitivity – neck, rear, or belly. Make sure you have lots of treats handy or you can also use your dog's kibble, as long as your dog really likes it. Food and treats are instinctively positive and desirable for dogs, and we use the positive feelings that food creates to help make other situations positive. Every dog is different and each will move at their own pace. Never rush a dog through these steps. If you notice discomfort in your dog or they are displaying clear warnings that they are uncomfortable, **STOP**, and go back to the previous step or end the session for the day. Always listen to your dog!

1. Get your treats out and ready. *Hint: we recommend using super high value food, like hot dogs or string cheese, cut into tiny pieces.*

2. Lightly touch one paw. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.

Please note: for all of these steps, if your dog gets bored before you hit 15 repetitions, take a break and do the rest later. These steps are designed to be done over time to avoid overwhelming your dog. Training should always be fun for both you and your dog!

3. Apply more pressure when touching one paw. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
4. Gently pick up the dog's paw – count to one. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
5. Gently pick up the dog's paw – count to three. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
6. Gently pick up the dog's paw – count to five. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
7. Gently pick up the dog's paw and squeeze lightly. Let go immediately. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
8. Gently pick up the dog's paw and squeeze more firmly- count to one. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
9. Gently pick up the dog's paw and squeeze more firmly- count to five. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
10. Grab a small towel this time. Gently pick up the dog's paw and rub the paw. Give the dog a treat. Repeat 15 times for each paw.
11. At this point your dog should have a more positive feeling when you touch their paws!

What not to do!

Remember the goal is to change your pet's emotional response to a stimulus, in this case being touched. Never push your pet into a situation that makes them feel uncomfortable. Listen to their language. They will tell you by giving appropriate signals to stop what you are doing. When a dog attempts to move away from being touched, growls, lips curls, or yelps, they are communicating their discomfort and this should be recognized and respected. Yelling, hitting, and scolding can extinguish these appropriate lower warning signs, increasing the chances of your dog escalating quickly to higher warning signs like lunging and snapping. Training does not work overnight, and all parties have to be committed.

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org>