

Do My Nails ... Please!

How (and why) teach your dog to love having his nails trimmed.

BY PAT MILLER

Two months ago, I read a news story about a dog owner in Minnesota who had shared her home and her life with her 10-year-old Great Pyrenees for eight years. On December 30, 2008, the dog attacked his owner as she was trying to trim his nails, sending her to the hospital for multiple bite wounds to her arms. The news report on the incident stated, “[The dog owner] was able to reach another room and closed the door, keeping the dog out.”

The owner in this sad story was treated and released from the hospital the same day. The dog is now dead – euthanized at the veterinary hospital for safety reasons, at the owner’s request.

Nail-trimming should not be a matter of life and death. Nor should any other



It often takes quite a bit of time and patience to teach your dog to actually enjoy having his nails trimmed, teeth brushed, and other uncomfortable but necessary grooming procedures. But the effort will pay a lifetime of benefits.

What you can do . . .

- Commit to making nail care an enjoyable experience for you and your dog rather than a tedious (or dangerous) chore.
- Never punish or admonish your dog for growling; he’s giving you valuable information.
- Engage the services of a positive training/behavior professional if you think trying to work with your dog’s paws and nails is too risky.
- Practice a minimum of five times a week, 15 minutes per session, until you and your dog love nail trimming.



routine grooming procedure. If a dog objects strongly to any sort of physical contact or restraint that may occur in the process of ordinary care, a smart, responsible owner needs to take immediate steps to overcome his objections in a positive, nonaversive manner. Fortunately, this process (described in detail below) is not difficult (or dangerous!) to do – but it does take a *serious* commitment of time.

Why not use force?

Most of us are pressed for time, and many dog owners may squirm at the thought of yet another dog-care duty that requires the investment of a lot of time (in addition to other training and exercise chores). So why not simply restrain the dog and firmly tell him “No!” if he growls or

otherwise objects to the pedicure or other grooming?

The news story of the Minnesota woman and her Great Pyrenees is sadly instructive in this regard. The article I read quoted the dog’s owner as saying that the dog had always been “very, very touchy” about his paws. She even said he had attacked “mildly” before, but she had been able to get him to stop. “He would growl, and generally I could say, ‘Stop it,’ and get him to stop,” she was quoted as saying. “This morning, it didn’t stop.” She then went on to say that for reasons that remained “unclear,” the dog attacked her.

Wait a second. This dog has been telling her for *eight years* that he didn’t want her to touch his paws. The owner

lays out all the reasons the attack occurred, and then says the reasons for it are unclear? How much clearer could it be? This is a classic example of a human totally ignoring her dog's attempts to communicate with her, this time with a very tragic ending.

Stress is the underlying factor behind almost all aggression – idiopathic aggression being the rare exception (see “Rage Without Reason,” WDJ June 2004). We know that suppressing aggressive behavior doesn't change aggressive behavior; it just drives it underground where it simmers, likely to smash its way out when the stress becomes too great and pushes the dog over his bite threshold – like it did with this Great Pyrenees. In this dog's case, at age 10 (advanced age for the giant breeds), there may also have been additional stressors such as arthritis, or other age-related conditions. If grasping his paws to clip nails caused him pain, that would have been an additional stressor that further exacerbated his reaction.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not condemning the owner's decision to euthanize a dog who caused her serious injury. It's difficult, if not impossible, to repair a dog-owner relationship that has been damaged this badly. Rehoming a 10-year-old dog with a history of aggressive behavior isn't generally realistic, either. The real tragedy was the eight years that led up to the final act in this drama – eight years in which the dog tried as best he knew *without* hurting his owner, to tell her that nail trimming made him very uncomfortable. Eight years during which the owner *could* have modified his behavior, rather than suppressing it.

Suppressing behavior

Behavior suppression is a regrettably popular approach to behavior modification in some circles today. This is partly a carryover from old-fashioned training methods. It has also experienced a large resurgence in popularity due to its regular use on a high-profile television show. But its popularity is also bolstered by the fact that, sometimes, it works.

There is something inherently satisfying to us humans when we tell someone to stop doing something and they stop. At least for the moment. What it *doesn't* do is change the underlying motivation for the behavior.

Dogs do things that are reinforced – the behavior either makes a good thing

happen (positive reinforcement), or makes a bad thing go away (negative reinforcement). A dog is motivated to *do* a behavior because it works to do one of those two things. They are also motivated to *stop* doing behaviors that are punished – the behavior makes good things go away (negative punishment), or makes bad things happen (positive punishment).

Aggression, which is initially an emotional response to stress, can be influenced by reinforcement and punishment. Over the years, that Great Pyrenees's growling in response to having his paws touched was probably negatively reinforced at least some of the time, since wise humans back off when a dog growls. The dog learned that *sometimes* people stopped touching his paws if he growled. Intermittent reinforcement makes a behavior very durable. When a behavior is reinforced *sometimes*, it's hard to make that behavior go away.

However, sometimes the dog's growling *didn't* work. Not only did his owner continue to mess with his paws, when he got more forceful about trying to make the bad thing go away, his owner got violent in response. So the positive punishment stopped the aggressive behavior for the moment, but it didn't make it go away, and it didn't alter the dog's underlying emotional response to the procedure that stressed him. The violence suppressed the behavior, but it didn't change it.

Modifying behavior

If instead of suppressing his aggression in response to paw handling, his owner had taught the Great Pyrenees to *love* nail trimming, the pair wouldn't be mentioned in this article. But another dog and owner well might be. I dare say there are thousands upon thousands of dogs who don't like having their nails trimmed, and whose discomfort signals in response to the procedure have been suppressed. Their lives – and their humans' lives – would be much happier if someone took the time to do a little behavior modification.

My own personal canine behavior science lab gives me plenty of nail-trimming material to work with. Three of our four dogs weren't too happy about pedicures when we first acquired them. Two of the three were unhappy about having their *paws* touched, much less having their nails trimmed. Dubhy, our Scottie, suffered from severe allergies when we found him. His paws were raw and bleeding.

No wonder he was sensitive about them! Lucy the Corgi, on the other hand, is just generally touchy about being touched. Bonnie the Scorgidoodle is fine about touching, even her paws, but doesn't like the restraint and pressure on her nails that goes along with the clipping. Here's how we “fixed” each one:

■ **Lucy (sensitive to all touch):** Since Lucy was touch sensitive in general, I used counter-conditioning and desensitization to help her overcome her dislike of being touched on her legs and body. (See “Counter-Conditioning and Desensitization to Touch,” previous pages). This also included other grooming procedures – brushing, looking at her teeth, and cleaning her ears – as well as giving her a positive association with restraint and hugging. Our ultimate solution to nail trimming involved the use of her “Wait” behavior. *After* we had completed her paw/nail clipper-touch desensitization protocol, I did the following:

1. Told Lucy to “Down” and “Wait.”
2. Placed a yummy treat 12 inches in front of her nose.
3. Clipped one nail.
4. Told her “Take it!” so she could jump up and eat the treat.
5. Repeated steps 1 through 4 for each subsequent next nail.

She now absolutely *adores* the nail clipping procedure, and I clip multiple nails in between “Take it!” cues, always keeping it random so she never knows which nail clip will result in the treat cue.

■ **Dubhy and Bonnie (unhappy about having paws touched):** I also did a paw/clipper touch desensitization protocol with Dubhy, until he was comfortable having his paws touched and his nails trimmed. However, he and Bonnie both have those awful, dense, black toenails that require heavy pressure on the clippers, which they both found aversive despite counter-conditioning. Plus, it's devilishly hard to know where the quick is on a solid black nail, and despite my most careful attention, from time to time I managed to

Counter-Conditioning and Desensitization to Touch

We often use counter-conditioning and desensitization (CC&D) in behavior modification to change a dog's association with an aversive stimulus from negative to positive. The easiest way to give most dogs a positive association is with very high-value, (really yummy) treats. I like to use chicken – canned, baked, or boiled, since most dogs love chicken breast meat and it's a relatively low-fat, nutritious food.

Here's how the CC&D process works for a dog who is sensitive to having his paws touched:

1. Determine the location where your dog can tolerate touching without reacting fearfully or aggressively. Perhaps it's her shoulder, perhaps her elbow, or maybe her knee. She should be a little worried, but not growl or try to move away. This is called the *threshold*.

2. With your dog on leash, touch her briefly and gently at threshold. The instant your dog notices the touch, start feeding bits of chicken, nonstop.

3. After a second or two, remove the touch, and stop feeding chicken.

4. Keep repeating steps 1 to 3 until touching at that location for 1 to 2 seconds consistently causes your dog to look at you with a happy smile and a "Yay! Where's my chicken?" expression. This is a *conditioned emotional response* (CER): your dog's association with the brief touch at that location is now positive instead of negative.

5. Now you need to increase the intensity of the stimulus by increasing the length of time you touch her at that same location, a few seconds at a time, obtaining a new CER at each new time period before increasing the time again. For example, several repetitions at 2 to 4 seconds, until you get consistent "Yay!" looks, then several repetitions at 4 to 8 seconds, then several at 8 to 12 seconds, etc., working for that consistent CER at each new duration of your touch.

6. When you can touch her at that spot for any length of time with her in "Yay" mode, begin to increase the intensity of stimulus

again, this time by moving your hand to a new location, 1 to 2 inches lower than your initial threshold. I suggest starting at your initial touch location and sliding your hand to the new spot, rather than just touching the new spot. Continue with repetitions until you get consistent CERs at the new location.

7. Continue gradually working your way down to your dog's paw, an inch or two at a time, getting solid CERs at each spot before you move closer to the paw.

8. When you get below the knee, also add a gentle grasp and a little pressure to the procedure – each is a separate step in the CC&D procedure. Continue working down the leg, all the way to the paw.

9. When you can touch, grasp, and put pressure on the paw, add lifting the paw.

10. If your goal is happy nail trimming, start the process over, this time with the nail clipper in your hand. Show the clippers to your dog and feed her a treat, until the appearance of the clippers elicits a "Yay!" response. Then do CC&D with the clipper ac-

tion – squeezing the clippers to make the sound and motion it would make if you were actually clipping nails.

Go through the whole touch sequence again, this time with the clippers in your hand, also touching her with the clippers, then again while you squeeze the clippers. Remember that you still feed yummy treats and obtain CERs throughout the whole process. When you can hold her paw and squeeze the clipper action next to her nail with a happy response, clip one nail, feed lots of treats, and stop. Do a nail a day until she's happy with that, then advance to two nails at a time, then three, until you can clip all her nails in one setting.

The more complex the stimulus, the more successful the dog's avoidance or aggressive strategies have been, and the more intense the response, the more challenging the behavior is to modify. Take your time. As my good friend and excellent trainer Jolanta Benal once said to me, "In behavior modification, if you think you're going too slow . . . slow down!"

Each dog is different, and will have issues about different aspects of a nail-clipping procedure. "Turtle" is very comfortable with having her paws touched and grasped, but is immediately uncomfortable when clippers are brought onto the scene. That's where her CC&D program will start.



First, trainer Sandi Thompson, of Berkeley, California, gives Turtle treats for maintaining her proximity to the trimming tool.



She does not go further until Turtle is displaying the desired "conditioned emotional response" (CER) – a bright, enthused look, without concern for the clippers.



Sandi asks Turtle to "shake hands" while staying close to the clippers. Usually, Turtle loves to "shake," but her expression shows she's a bit worried about doing this while the clippers are close by. Sandi gives Turtle delicious treats for progressively longer and longer handshakes until Turtle seems to forget about the clippers.



It's often worth the extra expense to try different types of clippers. Many dogs are more concerned about one type of tool than others.

A Quick Recovery: What to Do When You Accidentally Draw Blood

Few dog owners, even longtime animal care professionals, can truthfully testify that they've never "quicked" a dog's nail. If you never have, you're either extremely skilled or lucky, you've had someone else "do" your dog's nails, or you're relying on your dog to wear his own nails down on rough surfaces.

The "quick" is the live part inside the nail – with lots of sensitive nerve endings and a generous blood supply. If you've ever torn your own nail off below "ground level" you have an inkling of how awfully painful it is for your dog when you misjudge and cut the nail too short, causing it to bleed. Your dog's own reaction probably told you that you hurt him – a lot! It's no wonder that dogs often find nail trimming aversive.

Nail trimming is an important husbandry practice to teach your dog to love – or at least happily tolerate. It's even more important to do counter-conditioning and desensitization if he's already had a bad experience by being quicked. Your modification program will need to proceed even more slowly to help him overcome his fears.

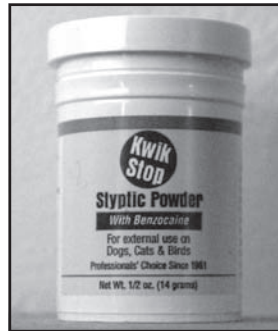
If you *do* quick your dog, first, you need to deal with the trauma – your dog's *and* yours. Remember not to scream or dance around like a hysterical monkey; this will only add to your dog's trauma. Calmly grab the container of styptic powder that you should have on hand and dip the tip of the nail in it to stop the bleeding. Then do some calm touching – massage, TTouch, or some touch-and-treat counter-conditioning at the point closest to his paw that your dog will let you touch him. Don't feel compelled to do any more clipping. You don't even need to touch or handle his paws if that's too hard for him. Just do some gentle, slow touching and positive reinforcement until he's relaxed and calm, then release him to entertain himself. Careful! When he moves around (or if he licks it, which is okay for him to do) the nail may start bleeding again. Don't leave him to his own devices on your living room carpet.

Once the initial trauma is over, it's time to repair the damage to his association with nail trimming:

■ **Make sure your clippers are super sharp (or use a nail grinder).** I prefer guillotine-style clippers with replaceable blades. Sharp blades put less pressure on the nail, so you can gently cut off thin slices of nail.

■ **Use counter-conditioning to teach your dog to love the sight of**

the clipper. Let him see the clipper in one hand, and feed him a *very* high-value treat from the other. Hide the clipper, stop feeding. Repeatedly present the clipper and feed a treat, until his eyes light up when he sees the tool, and he looks at your other hand for his goodie.



Every time you cut his nails, keep styptic powder ready, to stop any bleeding that may occur.

■ **Set several pairs of clippers in various locations around the house.** (You can use your old, dull ones for this.) Leave one on the kitchen counter. Show it to him when you pick up his dinner bowl, and set it on the floor next to his bowl when you feed him. Keep one in the entry by the hook where you hang his leash. Show it to him, then pick up his leash and take him out for a walk. Keep one on the end table next to the sofa where you watch television. When a commercial comes on, pick it up and feed him a treat.

■ **When you can see proof that your dog thinks the nail clipper is a wonderful predictor of good stuff,** work through the counter-conditioning and desensitization protocol detailed the previous page, until he's happy to have you hold his paw and touch his nails with the clipper.

■ **When a dog's nails grow long, the quick grows out inside the nail, so if your dog's nails haven't been done for a while, be very conservative.** When you start to actually trim his nails, shave just a *thin* slice – especially if the nails are black and you can't see the quick. Take a tiny bit off one nail, feed your dog

some treats, and stop. Note: When you clip thin slices off each nail, watch the texture of the nail. When you are far away from the quick the nail is hard and dry. As you get close to the quick it becomes softer.

■ **Do another session two to four hours later, working up to cutting a thin slice off the next nail.** You can do several sessions a day if you have the time, one nail at a time – as long as your dog is comfortable with the procedure. If he starts to get tense about it, back up to previous steps in the protocol and work back up to the actual trimming, even more slowly this time.

■ **As you continue to shave off slices daily and your dog continues to accept the trimming, gradually increase the number of nails you do each session, until you can clip an entire paw, and ultimately all four paws at one sitting.**



Don't try to clip super-long nails down to a nice short nail in one session; it's a sure recipe for "quicking" the dog, and making future sessions even more difficult.

“quick” them both. You can imagine how painful (and aversive) that must be – and how much of a setback that is even to the most careful modification program (see “A Quick Recovery,” next page).

I had to overcome a negative association of my own to implement the ultimate solution to Dubhy and Bonnie’s nail-trimming challenge. A decade ago while conducting a nail-trimmer product review

for *Whole Dog Journal* (“You Nailed It!” February 1999), I tested a nail-grinder. One of my dogs, the wonderful Josie, was a terrier-mix with hairy feet, and I neglected to keep her fur pulled back from the grinder. It got tangled in the mechanism and yanked painfully on her paw. I’ve been reluctant to use a grinder ever since. Yet I knew it was the right answer to my current two dogs’ nail trimming difficulties, so I bucked up and tried it, using a nylon stocking over their paws to hold back their fur. (The nails poked through a hole in the stocking toe for grinding.)

After some desensitization to the sound of the grinder, both Bonnie and Dubhy are much more comfortable with nail trimming (and still get lots of treats). Their nails look better than they ever have in their lives – and we’re all much happier!

Note: The “as seen on TV” battery-powered nail grinders are inexpensive, and have a built-in guard that prevents



When a dog’s nails get too long, they become more difficult to trim without “quicking” him. They can also cause him considerable discomfort when he walks. Over-long nails make the dog’s toes bend every which way – even when he is standing still!

hair from tangling in the grinder. However, they’re not very powerful, so it takes a while to get the job done and you go through a lot of batteries. The more expensive models that you can find in pet supply stores, catalogs, and Web-based pet supply businesses are worth the extra cost.

Operant conditioning

I often hear dog owners say, “I don’t need to trim my dog’s nails; she runs on pavement (or rocks, or sand) and keeps them worn down herself. “Great,” I think to myself – and sometimes say out loud. “When your dog becomes a less-active senior citizen and no longer wears her nails down, *then* you’ll face the battle, when it will be even more challenging after all those years to convince her to let you hold her paws and trim her nails.”

If you prefer to let your dog file her own nails, there’s an operant conditioning approach that will still work when your dog is in her golden years. Positive

trainer Shirley Chong in Grinnell, Iowa, suggests taking a board 8 to 12 inches wide and 24 to 26 inches long, covering it with slip-proof tape or coarse sandpaper, and teaching your dog to paw at the board to file his own nails. She describes the procedure in detail at shirleychong.com/keepers/nailfile.html. I haven’t tried this procedure yet myself, but I bet all my dogs would enjoy some shaping sessions learning

how to do this; it sounds like great fun!

The bottom line is, there are a lot of things the owner of the Great Pyrenees could have done over the years to help her dog tolerate, accept, even *love* having his nails done. If she had, he’d be alive today. If *your* dog doesn’t like having his nails done, don’t wait; help him learn to love the procedure *now*. Don’t let nail trimming kill *your* best friend. 🐾

Thanks to Sandi Thompson, of Bravo!Pup Puppy and Dog Training, in Berkeley, California, for demonstrating counter-conditioning and desensitization techniques.

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