

1) TIMING & ATTITUDE

- Plan to do lots and lots and lots and lots of repetitions of these behaviors (either partial or completed behaviors). Repetition is the key to success with any motor skill because the muscles learn to coordinate through the repetition of the desired movement. So, practice husbandry behaviors often. As an example, at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the trainers typically ask the whales to practice performing “layouts” every day. Though this behavior is a bit awkward for the whales – they must roll onto their dorsal side and hold their breath – it is essential for obtaining a routine monthly blood sample. If the majority of the layouts the trainers cued were “for real” (i.e., a needle was inserted into the whale’s tail flukes), the whales would quickly learn to balk at that cue.
- As with most training, husbandry behaviors are easier to teach if you begin as soon as possible. Puppies are more tractable than adult dogs.
- Just as in flossing your teeth, two or three short husbandry training sessions per day tend to produce the best results. Use an egg timer or a stopwatch to make sure you work for three minutes or less. Keep the relevant tools in places that will automatically remind you to practice. For example, leave the nail clippers in the kibble bag, a brush near the leashes, or the doggie toothbrush in the drawer with the official tug toy. Keep track of your progress with a simple behavior checklist stuck on your fridge door.
- Husbandry training is usually easier to do with a tired dog. Schedule your sessions for times when the dog is already relaxed, possibly at night while watching TV. When commercials come on, push the remote control’s mute button and grab your training tools.
- Don’t rush the training. Give yourself adequate time before your next vet or grooming appointment so you don’t feel you have a deadline looming ahead. Also, don’t wreck your training program by pushing your dog past his limits. A wise colleague, Suzi Moore, once pointed out to me that zoo trainers expect less from their animals because there’s no commonly held behavioral benchmarks. Therefore, they pressure the elephants, whales and walruses less and are prepared to accept slow progress. With dogs, though, we easily can compare each one’s rate of learning with the dozens of other dogs we’ve taught. This can lead to unrealistic expectations.

2) CLASSICAL CONDITIONING TIPS

Classical conditioning forms an association between two stimuli. Learning occurs by pairing a stimulus that initially has no meaning with one that has intrinsic meaning.

- Before launching into your husbandry behavior shaping program, pre-condition some spooky grooming sounds to be secondary reinforcers. In other words, use the whirring sound of a nail-grinding tool (e.g., Dremel), the clicking sound of nail clippers snipping a piece of plastic tubing, or the sound of running bath water as conditioned reinforcers, just like the clicker, that predict food (or other treats).

You'll know your dog has formed a strong positive association to these sounds when he runs toward rather than away from them.

- Classically condition a calming cue. Pair a distinct smell (e.g., lavender), word (e.g., "eeeeasy"), or tune (my favorite is "I love you, a bushel and a peck...") with gentle massage or decadent food. If you doubt that a smell can trigger an emotion response, think how you react to the smell of rubbing alcohol.
- Food has a physiological calming effect, so use it generously.
- Pair the action of touching your dog with many strong primary reinforcers so often that the touching itself becomes a conditioned reinforcer. This is especially important for dogs who don't naturally enjoy being petted. Beluga whales tend to be quite skittish and gradually have to be trained to accept, then later to enjoy, being touched and rubbed.
- Early in your training progression, include a second person to serve as a "pseudo-veterinarian." Make your training set-up as real as possible, so that your dog doesn't discriminate between training sessions (i.e., when only the person is present) and actual medical treatments, when two people are often involved.
- Take advantage of the fact that dogs tend to generalize less readily than humans do. If your dog should ever have a traumatic experience at a clinic or groomer, make his next visit as different as possible: change exam rooms, request a different veterinary technician or groomer if possible, place a soft mat under the dog, etc. I once had a panic attack sitting in an exam room at my dentist's office; it was a chemical reaction to the anesthetic injection (a derivative of adrenaline) the hygienist had given me. Now, three years later, that room and that hygienist still make me significantly tense – a testament to the power of classical conditioning.

3) OPERANT CONDITIONING TIPS

Operant conditioning forms an association between a behavior and a consequence.

Learning occurs by the reinforcement of certain categories of behavior.

- As much as possible, train each spooky stimulus separately. For example, a nail-grinding tool (e.g., Dremel) sounds odd, looks different, is often accompanied by a slight burnt smell (more salient to the dog than to us), and produces a unique vibrating sensation in the dog's digits. Exposing a dog to all these new sensations simultaneously is setting the dog up to fail. Instead, do a mock nail-grinding session with the tool turned off. Bring your dog into a room where another dog is having her nails ground. That way, your dog can get used to the sound and smell (which you could even associate with terrific food treats). Maybe you could get the dog comfortable with the vibrating sensation by placing the tip of the tool on a body part less sensitive than the paws (i.e., the back). Of course, be careful to use a protective covering (e.g., a sheet of plastic) between the spinning tip and the dog's fur, or else you'll end up with unintended dreadlocks!
- Train the behavior of getting up onto a grooming table or into a bathtub as a separate placement command. One of my students used progressively larger boxes, culminating with a refrigerator box, to shape her very large shepherd to climb into the tub. Also, use jackpots occasionally when your dog successfully performs a placement behavior. This is analogous to a person finding a hundred-

dollar bill on the ground – that person will tend to return to the same spot. For example, after giving a shy pointer named Jake an entire hamburger once for climbing into the bathtub, I subsequently had trouble getting him to stay out of the tub.

- Remember that heaps of repetitions build strong reliable behaviors.
- Intersperse your husbandry training with fun stuff like tricks, games and easy obedience behaviors.
- Once a day, touch your dog with an “odd” object: an umbrella, a spatula, an ice cube, a heating pad, a light bulb, keys, etc. This will help desensitize him to future surprises such as stethoscopes, grooming tools, bandages and rubbing alcohol.
- Teach your dog a couple of behaviors he can do while waiting for his vet or grooming appointment. As Gary Wilkes points out, fear is overcome by behaving. Make your dog an active subject. Hand-targeting is especially useful for this.
- Don’t forget to take your husbandry behaviors on the road as soon as possible. It’s not very useful if your dog is calm only in your kitchen. Bring along special high-value reinforcers, and end the brief session with a period of energetic play.

In *The Culture Clash*, Jean Donaldson reminds us that training is all about statistics. It is simply a way to change the probability that certain behaviors will occur in the future. Done well, it increases the probability that our dogs will perform desirable behaviors, such as remaining calm throughout a veterinary exam. Training does this by changing the dog’s expectations about the consequences of his behavior.