

Training Cats and Dogs to Love Being Petted or Groomed*

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.

This process is the same for cats and dogs and can be used for petting, brushing, or even trimming the hair with clippers.

Part 1: Start with classical counterconditioning.



Fig. A, Step 1: Groom a specific location or at a specific level of pressure, with the dog's mouth physically on your hand eating treats the entire time. Feed enough kibble or treats to last about 5 seconds at first.

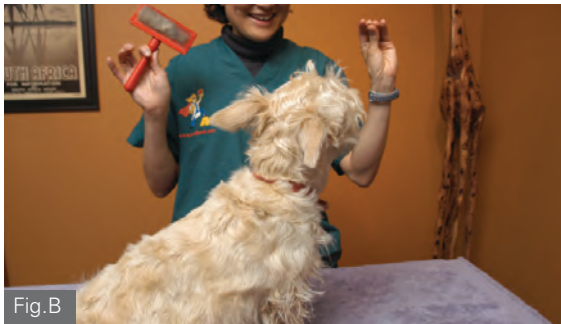


Fig. B, Step 2: As the dog is finishing the last treat (or kibble), remove both the brush and the treat hand so that it's clear that both the treats and the grooming are no longer accessible. Repeat this procedure until the dog is comfortable being groomed in this region of the body at this level of pressure at least 5 times in succession.

*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)

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Fig.C

Fig.C, Step 3: Next, groom a different area starting with light pressure, or groom the same area with heavier pressure.



Fig.D

Fig.D, Step 4: Again, stop the treats and the grooming at the same time. In this manner, gradually increase the intensity or pressure of the grooming and slowly move to different areas of the body. You should be able to groom fairly vigorously as long as you never cross the dog's stimulus threshold.

Next, you can go to brushing for 1 or more seconds before pairing it with treats, or you can go to operant counterconditioning.

Part 2: Switch to operant counterconditioning.



Fig.E

Fig.E, Step 1: Groom one area for about 5 seconds. Groom it for a short enough time period and at a light enough pressure that the dog never reacts aversely.

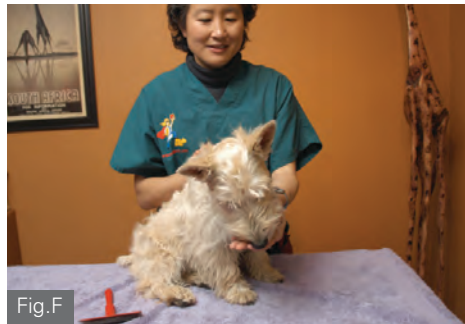


Fig.F

Fig.F, Step 2: When the dog holds still for grooming and shows no signs of struggling or aggression, reward her immediately with a treat. Repeat this 5 times in succession in the same location or with the same brush pressure; if she still remains calm, move on to a different area or a heavier brush pressure.

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**LOW STRESS
HANDLING, RESTRAINT AND
BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION OF
DOGS & CATS**
TECHNIQUES FOR DEVELOPING PATIENTS WHO LOVE THEIR VISITS



Fig.G

Fig.G, Step 3: When brushing in a new area or with heavier brush pressure, remember to always stay below the level that will cause the dog to react.



Fig.H

Fig.H, Step 4: Stop brushing and reward the dog. Make the first brush bouts short (5 seconds) so that the dog does not have much time to become irritated. This will also help her learn that sitting still for grooming leads to treats. If you have to put the brush down to give treats, then it's best to teach the dog (beforehand) that a marker word—such as “yes” spoken in a lively fashion—means a treat is coming. Do this by holding treats behind your back, saying “yes” and immediately delivering the treat to your dog. Repeat this 10-20 times per session. If you are good at delivering the treats suddenly and making your dog wait expectantly in between treats, she will quickly learn that “yes” predicts that a treat will come. It will come to signal her that she’s performed a correct behavior and a treat is on the way. This will allow you a short delay between the correct behavior and the presentation of the food reward.

WHAT'S WRONG HERE?



Fig.I

Fig.I, Example 1, Incorrect: The dog is avoiding the brush here. Brushing in this way will sensitize the dog to grooming, worsening her behavior and setting back your training. If she reacts this way, either stop the session and try later—this time being more careful—or try going back to a lower-level brushing stimulus or higher-valued treats.



Fig.J

Fig.J, Example 2a, Incorrect. Holding the treat out too far can cause the pet to move all over the table and thus teach her to become unmanageable and wiggly while you groom.



Fig.K

Fig.K, Example 2b, Correct: Now the technician holds the treats in a location that keeps the cat stationary.

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Part 3: Using the MannersMinder (Premier Pet, Midlothian, Virginia) to countercondition.

The MannersMinder, an automated treat dispenser, offers a convenient way to countercondition. Set the machine to release treats at a certain interval and then time the brushing to coincide with the dog or cat's snacking.

Classical counterconditioning with the MannersMinder.



Fig.L

Fig.L, Step 1: Set the MannersMinder to "multi-treat" (to dispense 5 treats in succession) and set the treat rate to 10 or 15 seconds. The machine will dispense 5 treats every 10-15 seconds. Now set the ratio switch to "fixed" so that each session lasts 1 minute. Finally, press the "down-stay" button so that the treats will start dispensing as per your settings. Only brush when the dog's nose is physically in contact with the food bowl as she eats the treats out of it.



Fig.M

Fig.M, Step 2: Once the fifth treat has been released, stop brushing so that it's clear to the dog that brushing is associated with the treats. Be sure to stay under the level that irritates the dog.



Fig.N

Fig.N, Step 3: Repeat the procedure at the same brush pressure or same spot on the dog 5 times in succession before moving to a different area of fur or increasing the brush pressure. That way, you're sure the dog understands the connection between brushing and food.



Fig.O

Fig.O: Always stop before the dog responds aversely. Note that the dog moving away from you could be an aversive reaction. You might want to place a hand on her to guide her or have her lie down so that she remains stationary.

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Switch to operant counterconditioning with the MannersMinder.



Fig.P, Step 1: When you can groom the dog anywhere on her body at the necessary level of pressure, switch to operant counterconditioning. Groom the dog for a short period (5 seconds). Ideally, because the dog knows she will get treats, she'll be paying more attention to the machine than to your grooming.



Fig.Q, Step 2: Stop grooming and dispense one or more treats from the MannersMinder. The advantage of giving treats by machine is that the dog will remain oriented toward the MannersMinder between treats instead of moving to face you. Systematically increase the amount of time you brush prior to rewarding the dog.

An alternative method of using the MannersMinder is to set the machine to give a single treat every 3 seconds at a fixed rate. When doing this, at first brush only as the dog is eating a treat (e.g., her head is in the MannersMinder bowl). At the rate at which it's set, you'll get 20 opportunities to brush every minute. Then begin to brush more firmly as the dog eats. When the dog is non-reactive with this type of brushing, brush at more random intervals as treats are being dispensed. That is, do not time your brushing to occur only as the dog's head is in the bowl. When you can brush at the heaviest level of pressure necessary with treats coming every 3 seconds and the dog ignoring the grooming, increase the interval between treats. Intervals can be increased to 5, 7, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 45, 60 and 300 seconds. Thus you can systematically increase the intervals between treats, usually doing so within several 3-minute sessions.

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