

Training Dogs to Love Having Their Collar Grabbed

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.

Dogs need to learn to calmly accept someone grabbing their collars or even their skin. People frequently get bitten when they suddenly grab their dogs to keep them from darting out the door or otherwise getting into trouble. One of the most common bite scenarios occurs during a dog fight when someone grabs one of the fighting dogs by the collar. When the aroused dog feels his collar being grabbed, he automatically turns and bites. We can decrease the chances of dogs being startled in this manner by desensitizing and counterconditioning puppies to collar grabs. Of course, all of these techniques work with adult dogs, too.

Part 1: Classical counterconditioning.



Fig.A



Fig.B

Fig.A, Step 1: Grasp the collar lightly while feeding the puppy a treat. The dog should ignore the hold on his collar and just focus on the treat, as if he doesn't notice you're grasping the collar. For some dogs, you may only be able to place your hand near the collar or reach towards the collar. Just be sure that the dog is focused only on eating the treat.

Fig.B, Step 2: Gradually grasp the collar more firmly until you can even pull the dog around a little with no adverse reaction while he's getting treats. He should always act like he's only interested in the treats and doesn't notice that you're pulling him.

Next, you can go to handling his collar for an instant and before pairing it with treats or you can go directly to step 3.

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: Operant counterconditioning.



Fig.C, Step 3: When the dog remains calm no matter how roughly you're grabbing the collar, progress to operant counterconditioning. Grasp the collar and jiggle it, but don't feed treats yet.



Fig.D, Step 4: Stop touching his collar and simultaneously reward the dog with a treat. You can even grasp the collar and pull him toward the treat, letting go as he starts to eat. If needed, you can add an intermediate treat before pulling him toward you.



Fig.E, F, G: The goal is to be able to grab the dog's collar or leash when he's focused on something else and pull him toward you and a treat that he can eat. He should think that grabbing and pulling on his collar equals a yummy treat for him. When he does he will actively run in the direction you're pulling in order to get to the expected reward even before you have a chance to fully pull his collar.

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