

HANDLING PROBLEMS

WHAT ARE HANDLING PROBLEMS, AND WHY DO THEY HAPPEN?

Some dogs become nervous or upset when people reach towards them or touch certain parts of their bodies. It's likely that most dogs with this kind of problem weren't handled enough as young puppies, but dogs can also develop sensitivity to handling as a result of negative or frightening experiences—like painful veterinary treatment or collar-grabbing before the delivery of punishment.

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY DOG HAS HANDLING PROBLEMS?

Although dogs may show anxiety about *any* kind of touching, many dogs seem particularly sensitive about people handling the following:

- paws
- ears
- collar or collar area
- muzzle
- tail

If your dog has handling problems, you may notice any or all of the following behaviors when she becomes nervous about people touching or reaching toward her:

- attempting to flee or hide
- cowering, shaking or rolling over
- freezing and/or staring
- growling and/or lip-lifting (showing teeth)
- “orienting” to a person’s hand (whipping the head around toward a hand during touching or petting)
- orienting to a person’s hand and mouthing it during touching or petting
- snapping and/or biting (these are especially likely to occur when a dog is restrained or feels trapped and unable to get away)

All of the above behaviors are your dog’s way of warning you that she’s uncomfortable or afraid and under a great deal of stress. If you notice any of them when handling or grooming your dog—or if you notice any of them when *someone else* is touching your dog—immediately stop whatever seems to be causing your dog’s negative reaction.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY DOG WITH HER HANDLING PROBLEMS?

Although living with a dog who’s nervous about certain kinds of touching requires patience and careful management, you *can* successfully address handling issues through prevention and training.

Management

You and Your Dog: If you’re handling your dog and you notice signs of stress, it’s best to STOP what you’re doing. Sometimes, however, you *must* handle your dog in ways that might upset or frighten her—for example, when it’s time to take her to the vet, brush her, trim her nails or give her a bath.

The easiest and most effective way to tackle this dilemma is to desensitize your dog to a muzzle in advance, *before* you need to do things she’ll probably find unpleasant. Get a muzzle from a pet store and teach her to put

her nose into it to get a treat. When your dog gets used to putting her nose into the muzzle for a cookie, you can gradually increase the time that it's on, continuing to feed her treats through the muzzle, as long as she's got her nose in it. Eventually, you can clip the muzzle on and feed her while she's wearing it. Remember to go slow throughout the muzzle desensitization process, and treat it like a fun game. If you need help or advice, call the Richmond SPCA's Behavior Helpline (number below).

Other People and Your Dog: Dogs who get nervous when handled in general will probably become *even more* nervous when handled by new people or in new situations. Be sure to explain your dog's problem to guests and strangers *in advance*—before they meet and/or try to touch your dog. If your dog shows any signs of anxiety when people touch or reach toward her, ask them to feed her treats before or instead of petting her. Always let your dog approach new people on her own, rather than the other way around. If you do, she'll warm up to them a lot faster.

Whenever possible, avoid putting your dog in situations that will probably make her anxious. For example, if your especially loud neighbor and/or his especially loud kids are coming over to visit, and you think that your dog might be nervous about meeting or being touched by them, put her in another part of the house and give her something tasty to chew on until your guests leave. (She'll be much happier.)

Always remember that it's your responsibility to protect your dog. If she's interacting with other people and starts to seem nervous, immediately and calmly remove her from the situation, so that she doesn't feel it necessary to take matters into her own paws.

Behavior Modification

First and foremost, avoid any kind of coercive training techniques. "Correcting," punishing or yelling at your dog if she growls at you or others when she's nervous about handling will almost certainly worsen the problem. (Your dog will learn that she has a NEW reason to fear handling, since every time it happens and she tries to tell you that she's uncomfortable, *you* suddenly get pretty scary and bad things happen.) The proper way to address your dog's handling issues involves the use of a desensitization and counterconditioning program. By exposing your dog to a tolerable level or type of touching that does not make her nervous or frightened and teaching her that whenever she gets handled, you start doling out extremely tasty treats, you can help her learn that handling isn't as scary as she thought. It makes delicious goodies happen!

RESOURCES & RECOMMENDED READING

For detailed information about specific training techniques, we highly recommend purchasing Jean Donaldson's *Mine!*, which has a very well-written section on addressing handling issues. You can find it in our Lora Robins Gift Shop.

If you'd like in-depth instruction, an experienced professional dog trainer can guide you through a carefully planned training program to resolve your dog's handling issues. Please call our **Behavior Helpline** if you'd like a referral to a local trainer who can help. Of course, you can also call us anytime or come in for a consult with one of our trainers if you have questions or need advice about your dog's behavior: **804-643-SPCA**.