



Desensitizing Your Animal

Living with and loving a dog you cannot touch, cuddle, or hug is just about as silly as living with and loving a person you cannot hug. It is also potentially dangerous. Even so, veterinarians and groomers will tell you that hard-to-handle dogs are extremely common. Indeed, many dogs are extremely stressed when restrained and/or examined by strangers.

There are few physical differences between hugging and restraint, or between handling and examination. The difference depends on your puppy's perspective. Generally, puppies feel they are hugged and handled by friends, but restrained and examined by strangers.

Veterinarians and groomers simply cannot do their jobs unless your dog remains relaxed and still while being examined. Fearful and aggressive adult dogs and sometimes just plain wriggly adolescent dogs often need to be restrained, tranquilized, or even anesthetized for routine physical examination and grooming. Restraint makes the procedure much scarier for dogs. Untrained dogs are exposed to the risk of anesthesia, the additional safety precautions consume the veterinarian's time, and hence the owners must pay more money. It is just too silly. Adult humans do not require anesthesia during routine trips to the doctor, dentist, and hair dresser; neither would dogs, if only their owners had taught them to enjoy meeting and being handled by people.

It is simply not fair to allow your puppy to grow up to be wary and anxious around people and afraid of their touch. It is not sufficient that your pup merely tolerates handling; he must learn to thoroughly enjoy being handled by strangers. Your puppy needs to be handled by familiar people before unfamiliar people, adults before children, women before men, and girls before boys.

As with the socialization exercises, adult family members need to accustom the pup to enjoy being handled and gently restrained first. Then your puppy knows and enjoys the handling and gentling game before strangers and children become involved. It is quite easy-and thoroughly enjoyable-to teach young puppies to like being handled and examined by people, whereas teaching adolescent and adult dogs to accept handling, especially by children and strangers, can be time-consuming and potentially dangerous.

Training Your Dog to Accept Hugs and Restraint

This is the fun part: you get to hug your puppy. In fact, every family member and all your guests get to hug the puppy. Relaxing with your puppy is a lot of fun, especially if your puppy is relaxed. If he is not relaxed, you are going to teach your puppy to relax, calm down, and thoroughly enjoy a good long cuddle.

Provided your pup was handled frequently prior to weaning and especially neonatally, at eight weeks of age he should go as limp as a noodle whenever picked up, and should settle down as relaxed as a rag doll on your lap. Even if your puppy did not have the benefit of plentiful early handling in his original home, handling exercises are easy at eight weeks of age. However, you had better get started, because in just twelve weeks time, with a hard-to-handle, five-month-old adolescent, the same simple handling exercises will be a completely different story. Untrained adolescent dogs are notoriously difficult to handle.

Pick up your pup, put him on your lap, and hook one finger around his collar so that he doesn't jump off. Slowly and repetitively stroke the pup along the top of his head and back in an attempt to get him to settle down in any position he finds comfortable. If your pup is a bit squirrely and squirmy, soothingly massage his chest or the base of his ears. Once the pup is completely relaxed, pick up the pup and lay him down on his back for a soothing tummy rub. Massage his belly by making a repetitive circular motion with the palm of your hand.