

Puppy Body Handling

Quick Tips for Success

Getting puppies comfortable with handling when they are young (3-14 weeks of age) is critical. All dogs will need to be handled regularly for grooming and veterinary care. Starting early will help them be comfortable with handling as adults.

Both familiar caretakers and unfamiliar people should handle puppies. All handling experiences should be positive, not neutral or bad. Watch the pup's body language when handling and give them delicious treats. Include body handling exercises in socialization and early exposure protocols.

(Learn more: [Quick Tips for Success: Puppy Socialization and Early Exposure](#))

Remember to practice good biosecurity to prevent the spread of disease. This includes sanitizing examination areas and surfaces, hand washing or wearing gloves, clean clothes, and foot covers.

Handling should always be gentle.

Exposure should be gradual.

Start with short exposures and slowly increase the intensity.

The intensity includes the amount of pressure, the invasiveness, and the duration.

Pair the exposure with food to make the experience positive.

Increase each step separately.



Individualize your protocols to ensure success for each puppy.

Start with body parts that the puppy is most comfortable with (for example, their chest, shoulders, or back) and move toward those they are least comfortable with (for example, ears, paws, mouth).

Individual puppies have different food preferences.

Steps for Getting Puppies Used to Handling

1) Identify and gather treats the puppy will readily eat.

2) Plan the sequence of body parts to handle from least sensitive to most sensitive.

3) Choose a space where the puppy is relaxed and comfortable

4) Let the puppy explore and check that they will take treats.

5) Begin the handling protocol. Start with a non-invasive touch on a body part where the puppy is comfortable. For example, gently stroke the puppy's side or chest.

6) Offer the puppy high-value treats during handling, building the association that handling is good.

When the handling stops, the food goes away.

7) Check the pup's behavior and body language for comfort. If the puppy is comfortable, slightly increase the duration or invasiveness of handling. If you notice that the puppy is uncomfortable, go back to where they were comfortable.



Keep the handling sessions short and end on a positive note: leave the puppy wanting more!

Begin your next session one step behind where the puppy was last successful.

Note: If the puppy is becoming more fearful or uncomfortable, consult your veterinarian or a behavior professional.

When the puppy is comfortable with their primary caretaker handling them, complete the steps above with a less familiar caretaker and finally, a person that is new to the puppy.



During experiences that may be scary or painful (such as bathing or vaccinating) feed throughout the entire event to prevent setbacks. Try canned dog food, spray cheese, or Braunschweiger (sausage) on the kennel or tub wall, or exam table. There are hands-free products that slow down feeding such as a Lickimat or Bath Buddy.

Puppy brains are primed to learn what is safe or unsafe quickly during this period.

Avoid traumatic experiences as they can create lifelong fears. Pups may show changes in their previous comfort level once the fear period begins (~8-10 weeks of age). Adjust protocols as needed to ensure good experiences.