



Managing Canine Handling Sensitivities

Many dogs seek out touch from people. They love being petted, scratched, and rubbed. However not all dogs prefer all types of touch from all people. Under certain circumstances, dogs can react with fear or defensive aggression. There are many reasons a dog might be sensitive to handling. Fear, a history of invasive procedures (such as nail trims or medical restraint), pain, or reacting to their signals being ignored during interactions are just a few.

Below are some strategies that can help you set your handling sensitive dog up for success.

- **Manage the environment for your dog's success.** Can't harness your dog? Try simply letting them out into a yard or exercise pen (if safe) to potty instead of harnessing them for a walk. Want your dog on the bed or couch but they can't jump up? Add stairs or a doggie ramp instead of picking them up. Create opportunities for your dog to use their space while minimizing handling.
- **Pay attention to their body language.** Going still, becoming tense, lowered posture, lip licks, ears back, lifting a paw, hard stares, whale eye (where you see the whites), head whips, looking away/moving away, and lip lifts are all subtle body language cues that your dog has had enough.
- **Respect the dog's choices when safe to do so.** Constant or intrusive handling is likely to make your dog *less* tolerant of handling, and *more* likely to escalate to snapping, growling, or biting overtime. If you offer your hand and they aren't interested, give them space rather than forcing them to interact. Allowing them choice in their interactions can help them feel like they do not need to escalate their behavior to get their point across.
- **Use training games to encourage initiating touch.** "Touch Targeting" is a basic positive reinforcement training protocol that (in addition to being the building block for all sorts of cool tricks) helps show your dog that they can control how and when they touch you—and when they do they get something they LOVE!
- **Don't punish the warning signs!** Dogs who head whip, freeze, whale eye, growl, or show teeth when they are uncomfortable have chosen a GREAT alternative to biting. They are communicating effectively with you. Dogs who have been punished for growling or showing teeth often skip straight to a bite overtime. We WANT to know when they are getting uncomfortable *before they escalate to a bite* so that we can give them the space they need.
- **Become an advocate for your dog!** Many people will assume that they can approach and pet your dog. It is your job to let them know that your dog may not be ready for that contact and to give them space. *Children especially are not good candidates for interacting with handling sensitive dogs*, so make sure that your dog is either carefully supervised or has a safe place to go when children are present.
- **Create a "safe space" your dog can go when you have visitors.** If you think your guests will not be able to respect your dog's space, help avoid unwanted situations by allowing your dog the option of retreating to where they feel comfortable, or set them up in a different space preventatively before your visitors arrive.
- **Use care when picking a groomer or vet.** Many dogs require regular grooming to stay healthy. For handling sensitive dogs, grooming and vet care can be a challenge. Communication with your groomers and vets is key, but just as important is doing your homework. Does the groomer use positive reinforcement techniques, such as Fluff Dog Groomers in the Bay Area? Does the vet's office you use practice Fear Free protocols or similar? Having a game plan for these visits can make a huge difference.
- **Practice "Cooperative Care".** Train your dog to be a participant in invasive handling procedures, such as nail trims and vaccines. For more information, attend our Cheerful Checkups seminar, sign up for private training through our website (www.eastbayspca.org/training) or read "Cooperative Care: Seven Steps to Stress-Free Husbandry" by Deb Jones. You can also use tools like the Scratch Pad (<https://scratchpadfordogs.com/>) to allow your dog to set their own pace during grooming.

For more information or to request behavior help, please contact our Behavior and Training department at www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp