



Cooperative care is when your dog voluntarily participates in routine procedures, such as grooming, teeth brushing or any handling they might experience during a veterinary exam. Here are a few tips for getting your dog started!

## Cooperative Care

Many dogs experience some level of anxiety or stress when their body is handled (e.g. paws, ears, mouth) for procedures like nail trimming, teeth brushing or grooming. Going to the veterinarian can also be stressful, as they may experience discomfort from something like a vaccination, or fear from unfamiliar people touching or handling them. Cooperative care is teaching your dog how to voluntarily participate in routine care and veterinary procedures.

There are a few basics that can help prepare your dog for low-stress nail trimming, teeth brushing, grooming, and other care procedures.

**Note:** If your dog shows aggression when attempting any care procedures, it is highly recommended that you consult with a veterinarian to rule out any underlying pain or illness. At their discretion, they may also be able to prescribe an appropriate anti-anxiety medication to help reduce your dog's stress prior to and during a procedure while you seek behavioural assistance from a certified dog trainer who uses reward-based training.

## Before You Start

The most important part of cooperative care is that your dog is allowed to "say no." They can disengage (e.g. walk away) from your training session if they find something stressful. It is important to stop training and give your dog a break if they show any signs of stress. This prevents your dog from escalating to aggression, keeping the situation safe and low stress for both you and your dog.

Here are a few common signs of stress in dogs:

- Lip licking
- Tight or closed mouth
- Flattened ears
- Whale eye (whites of the eyes are visible)
- Lifting a front paw
- Moving away from you, avoiding touch, a lowered or stiff posture
- Tucked tail

Research has also shown that allowing your dog to have some level of control, or the ability to "say no" during uncomfortable procedures makes them more willing participants. If you teach your dog that they have an option to "opt-out" from what is happening, this reduces fear and stress. Therefore, they will be more willing to participate, especially if they are rewarded for staying engaged in the



procedure. Though this may seem counterintuitive at first, we continue to see through research and practical training that cooperative care teaches animals how to voluntarily accept an unpleasant experience.

To be successful in cooperative care, you will need to:

- Start slow and progress at your dog's pace. Always stop if they show signs of stress and allow them to walk away if they choose to do so. Be patient!
- Reward for any attempt at the desired behaviour. Verbally praise your dog and provide treats, as you need to keep your dog motivated to participate.
- Never force your dog to participate or punish your dog if they disengage. This will cause fear and stress and will make your dog less willing to participate in future. It can also cause your dog to show fear-based aggression, which is unsafe and stressful.
- Seek consultation from a veterinarian or certified dog trainer who uses reward-based training if your dog shows signs of aggression or significant discomfort. This may indicate that they have previously had a negative experience with handling or possibly underlying pain, which requires treatment and/or professional oversight to develop a behaviour modification plan.

## Stationing

When you're performing any care procedures (e.g. grooming, nail trimming) your dog will be less anxious if they are on a non-slip surface. Use a mat such as a bathmat, yoga mat, or section of carpet and place it on the ground in a quiet area of your home.

### Steps:

- 1) Start by encouraging your dog to explore the mat – dropping some treats on the mat can help.
- 2) As soon as your dog steps onto the mat, verbally praise and give your dog a treat!
- 3) Continue this until your dog is willingly stepping all paws onto the mat.
- 4) Encourage your dog to sit or lay down on the mat – and again, verbally reward with treats!
- 5) After a while, you can start to introduce a cue word.

For example, as your dog walks onto the mat, say "on your mat" at the same time. Repeat this and reward. With repetition, your dog will associate your cue "on your mat" – or whichever cue you choose – with going to their mat.

When you start to introduce different tools (e.g. nail clippers or a grooming brush) to your dog, always do so with your dog on their mat. This will ensure they are on a stable surface (slipping makes dogs anxious!) and your dog will learn to associate the mat with a positive training experience.

## Chin Rest

Teaching your dog to rest their chin in your hand can help prepare them to stay still for a procedure such as grooming, a veterinary exam, having their teeth brushed, or their eyes or ears cleaned.



Start by teaching this behaviour on your dog's mat and in a quiet area of your home.

### Steps:

- 1) Start in a seated position on your dog's training mat. If you have mobility issues, you can also sit on a chair or couch.
- 2) Extend out your palm (face up) and hover it below your dog's chin. Say "yes" and give your dog a treat.
- 3) Try this a few times, gradually working towards having your hand directly below and touching your dog's chin. You can also use treats to lure your dog's chin onto your palm, if they need a bit of extra encouragement.
- 4) Continue this until your dog is comfortable with your palm underneath their chin for at least 5-10 seconds.
- 5) After a few sessions, you can start to introduce a verbal cue, such as "chin" or "rest." As you place your palm underneath your dog's chin, verbally say "rest" and reward your dog.
- 6) Over time, your dog will associate the cue "rest" with having your palm under their chin. They will likely start to voluntarily place their chin on your palm when you extend out your hand and say the cue word.

**Note:** If your dog lifts their head up or away from your palm at any point, that's ok! Try again, and reward for any attempt at keeping their chin on your palm. This is just your dog saying they are a bit uncomfortable with the process, so you just need to take a short break or go back a step.

When your dog can comfortably keep their chin rested on your palm for about 10-15 seconds, you can start to introduce different care tools. For example, verbally cue "rest" and then with your other hand, reach towards their body with a toothbrush.

Start slow, holding the toothbrush away from their body and very gradually, move it closer towards your dog's mouth while they stay in a chin rest position. This takes time and patience, so go slow and always reward! If they move out of the chin rest position, that's ok. Give them a break and start again slowly.

If you have any issues introducing tools once you have taught the chin rest behaviour, a certified dog trainer can help you introduce different types of care tools or body handling.

## Touch Desensitization

Touch desensitization is the process of having your dog become comfortable with having different parts of their body touched or handled. Most dogs are a bit anxious about having vulnerable areas touched, such as their paws, ears, muzzle, stomach, or tail.



They may also be fearful about having their body touched with various tools, such as a grooming or toothbrush, a face wipe, or veterinary tools during a routine exam, such as a stethoscope or medical gloves. We can make body handling less stressful for our dog through desensitization and positive reinforcement.

Start touch desensitization on your dog's mat and in a quiet area of your home.

### Steps:

- 1) Cue your dog to go onto their mat, in a sit, standing, or lying position – whatever is most comfortable for your dog.
- 2) Pick an area of the body you want to start with. For example, let's say we want to be able to comfortably handle our dog's paws.
- 3) Reach your hand towards one of your dog's front paws. Just move your hand so it's close to your dog's paw, but not touching it. You can also say the word "paw" as you extend out your hand, which gives your dog some predictability.
- 4) If they stay still without moving their paw away, praise and reward with treats.
- 5) If they move away or retract their paw, this is simply your dog's way of saying, *"you're going a bit too fast and I'm unsure about this."* Simply remove your hand and try again, and this time, don't move your hand as close. Gradually move your hand closer to their paw, rewarding your dog for every closer approach.
- 6) Eventually, you should be able to comfortably touch and handle your dog's paws.

You can repeat this exercise for any area of your dog's body. You may want to start easy, by touching areas they are already comfortable with (e.g. their back or side) and then work towards more sensitive areas. This will often take multiple sessions, so don't rush! Be patient and go at your dog's pace.

Once your dog is comfortable with your hand touching different areas of their body, you can start to present different tools, such as a grooming brush. You would follow the same process, of presenting the tools at a distance and slowly bringing them close to your dog's body while rewarding them.

### What to AVOID

Here are some things to avoid when teaching cooperative care:

- Forcing your dog to participate or accept physical handling. This can result in your dog having an escalated defensive reaction, such as snapping or biting. It will also reduce your dog's willingness to participate in future.
- Punishing your dog for "saying no" (e.g. walking away) or showing signs of stress. This is your dog's **ONLY** way of communicating their discomfort. Punishing stress behaviours (e.g. lip licking, growling, avoiding contact) may cause your dog to not show warning signs in future, significantly increasing a bite risk.



- Not rewarding your dog for basic attempts at the behaviour. Reward for all desirable behaviour – would you work if you didn't get paid? Pay your dog with treats!
- Training in an environment with distractions or when your dog is stressed. Always seek a quiet, low-distraction environment to start teaching these basic exercises. This will help your dog focus, reduce any anxiety, stress, and increase training success.

Always seek consultation from a certified dog trainer if you are unsure about how to approach cooperative care, or if your dog shows any signs of aggression or significant discomfort. They may also advise for your dog to have a veterinary exam before training, to ensure they are not showing aggression due to underlying pain or illness.

### Additional Resources

The Training Academy at the Edmonton Humane Society offers private consultations for dogs. One of our certified dog trainers can help you with cooperative care using reward-based training. For more information, visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/what-we-do/education-training/dog-training/privateconsultations/>

#### Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:  
[askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com](mailto:askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com)

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).