



## Training Dogs and Cats to Love Having Their Ears Handled

### Overview of Behavior Modification Terms and Processes

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of counterconditioning with desensitization.

With classical counterconditioning we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with desensitization, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and then gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With operant counterconditioning, we train the pet to perform behaviors that are incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns rewards and enjoys performing the behavior so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure or have her hold her nose to a target while she is handled.

Further description, examples and pictures of these terms and processes can be found in the *Low-Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs & Cats* book and DVD set.

Many dogs and cats get ear infections or mites at some time in their lives and will require examination and medication. Taking just a few minutes a day for a week or so to countercondition a pet to ear handling can prevent problems down the road. Even pets who already have a bad association will soon learn to enjoy ear handling with good technique on your part. This protocol can be used with both dogs and cats.

### Part 1: Classical Counterconditioning - Pairing ear handling with food



Fig.A

**Fig.A, Step 1a:** Start by feeding treats to your dog. When he is readily eating them, then rub the skin or fur near the ear vigorously. Feed your pet long enough so that you can rub the skin for 3-5 seconds. Your dog's mouth should be physically on your hand eating treats the entire time. Make sure you handle gently enough on an area that does not cause your dog to react to the handling. In other words, always stay below the threshold of handling which causes your dog to react negatively.



Fig.B

**Fig.B, Step 1b:** As the dog finishes the treats, remove both the treat hand and the hand that's rubbing the dog.



Fig.C

**Fig.C, Step 2a:** When you can rub the ear area in this manner several times in a row while your dog eats, begin to rub an area closer to the ear base, or rub the pinna instead. You might need to start with light pressure. Again, make sure your dog has begun eating the treats before you start rubbing the ear.



Fig.D

**Fig.D, Step 2b:** As always, remove both the treat hand and the rubbing hand before your dog is finished eating. When your dog is good at this step for several trials, move on to the next step. Systematically work your way into the ear and use more rigorous handling, but take care not to move along too quickly or you may elicit a bad reaction.



Fig.E

**Fig.E, Step 3a:** Get to the point where you can stick your finger in your dog's ear while giving treats.

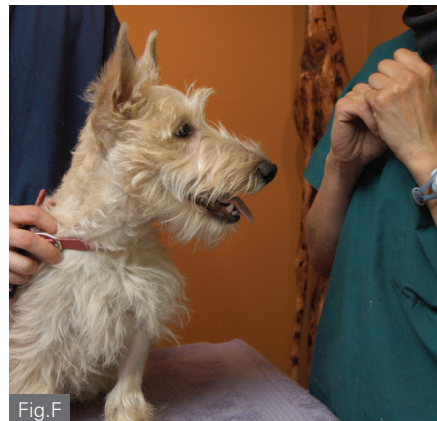


Fig.F

**Fig.F, Step 3b:** As your dog finishes the treat, stop handling the ear. Your dog should be focused on you with the expectation that she will get more treats.

The pet should now be accepting rigorous ear handling while receiving treats. Next, you can handle the ears for 10 or more seconds before pairing handling with treats, or you can go directly to operant counterconditioning where you'll use the treat as a reward for good behavior.



Fig.G



Fig.H

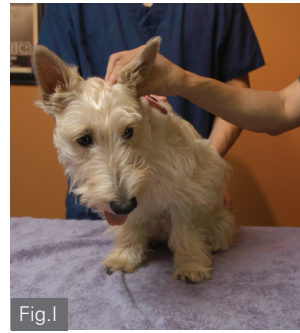


Fig.I

**Fig.G, Step 1a:** First rub around the ear. If you've counterconditioned well thus far, your dog should not react. Stop before she gets irritated.

**Fig.H, Step 1b:** Immediately after stopping, reward her for holding still and allowing you to handle her by giving her a treat to make it more clear to your dog. You can use a marker word such as "yes" right as you stop handling the ear, if you've already trained it. That way, she knows exactly when she's done something good and what the reward is for. If you say "yes" just as you are finishing the rub, she'll understand that the reward is for holding still the entire time.

**Fig.I, Step 2a:** Now rub more vigorously but stay below your dog's threshold of tolerance.



Fig.J

**Fig.J, Step 2b:** Stop before she becomes irritated and reward her for holding still when you handle her.



Fig.K

**Fig.K, Step 3a:** At this point, you should be able to stick a finger in your pet's ear for several seconds prior to rewarding with treats.



Fig.L

**Fig.L, Step 3b:** Once you can rub any area for several seconds prior to giving a treat, increase the amount of time you can handle the ear before giving the treat. Eventually you might not need treats, and you can switch to praise or petting.

Upon successfully completing these steps, you will have a pet that associates ear handling with positive experiences. Now instead of running away when she sees those ear medications, she'll look forward to having her ears handled.