



Training Dogs to Love the Gentle Leader

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.

The Gentle Leader (GL) and similar collars, such as snootloop (www.snootloop.com) and halti® can make a difference in your ability to train and control your dog. All three collars help you redirect your dog's attention to you so that you can then reward more appropriate behaviors. They can particularly be useful in the veterinary hospital setting because they allow you to control the head and mouth without needing to restrain the body tightly.

As a result, it's good to train dogs to enjoy wearing this type of head halter even if you don't plan to use it on a day-to-day basis. In this handout I'll use a GL head collar to demonstrate how to train dogs to love wearing these devices. The technique is the same for halti® or snootloop. For many dogs, this process just takes one to three 5-minute sessions. For dogs who already dislike wearing the head halters, it's best to spend plenty of time on this process, just to be safe.

Part 1: Training your dog to associate the head collar with good things.



Fig. A, B, Step 1: Grasp the GL at the bottom of the nose loop in a manner that keeps it open.



Fig.C

Fig.C, Step 2: Hold treats in the other hand. Have enough treats to occupy your dog for at least 3 seconds. One option is to use many small treats or kibble. Hold on to each treat so that your dog has to chew or lick it for 1 to 2 seconds before he takes it so that you can dispense the treat in a controlled manner. For the tiny liver biscotti pictured above, if used with a large dog you can hold them as pictured here instead of presenting them individually.



Fig.D

Fig.D, Step 2: By holding the treats in the manner shown here, you can immediately follow one treat with another by rolling treats from the palm of your hand to your thumb and index finger. These are Natural Balance semi-moist food rolls cut into bite-size treats. You can also cut long thin treats and hold them in a way that requires your dog to nibble small bits off at a time.



Fig.E

Fig.E, Step 3a: Start by placing your entire hand through the GL while holding the treats.



Fig.F

Fig.F, Step 3b: Hold the GL and treats away from your dog so that he does not try to jump on or nose you to get the treats.



Fig.G

Fig.G, Step 3c: Then place the treats close to your dog's nose but far enough forward so that he has to reach to get them. He should immediately reach forward to eat them. It's important that he move forward to get them so that you can tell that it's his choice to come closer. If he looks wary of the GL, remove your hand and start again but this time with the GL farther up your arm.



Fig.H

Fig.H, Step 3d: As he is finishing the treat, retract your hand and the GL so that he starts to understand that he loses the opportunity to receive treats when the GL is not close by. When your dog immediately takes treats in this manner 5 times in a row, continue to the next step.

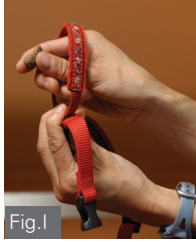


Fig. I



Fig. J



Fig. K



Fig. L

Fig. I, Step 4a: Extend the treat a shorter distance through the GL.

Fig. J, Step 4b: Again, start by holding the treat and GL out of your dog's reach so that you control his access to the treats.

Fig. K, Step 4c: Then place both within reach and let your dog move forward to eat the treat. Do not try to push the GL onto your dog's nose; just hold it steady.

Fig. L, Step 4d: As your dog finishes the treats, move the GL out of reach so that you're in control of the situation. When your dog takes treats without hesitation 5 or more times in a row, move on to the next step.



Fig. M



Fig. N

Fig. M, Step 5a: Now hold the treat right in the loop of the GL.

Fig. N, Step 5b: First hold the treats and GL away from your dog so that he must stand calmly.



Fig. O



Fig. P

Fig. O, Step 5c: Next, hold both out so that your dog leans forward through the GL loop to eat the treats.

Fig. P, Step 5d: Retract your hand and the GL as your dog is finishing the last treat, so that he doesn't have the chance to pull his head away; never let him do that. Always move the GL and treats away first, so that you don't train your dog to pull his head away.



Fig. Q

Fig. Q, Step 6a: Now hold the treat behind the loop so that your dog must stick his nose through it to get the food.



Fig. R

Fig. R, Step 6b: As before, begin by holding both the treat and the GL away from your dog.



Fig.S

Fig.S, Step 6c: Then extend both toward him so that your dog pushes his nose through the loop to get the treat.



Fig.T

Fig.T, Step 6d: Be sure to hold the GL steady so that your dog can push his nose through. You want your dog to learn to shove his nose through against the pressure of the loop.



Fig.U

Fig.U, Step 7a: When your dog readily pushes his nose through several times in a row and looks completely comfortable doing so, snap the GL closed behind his ears. For dogs who have a history of hating the GL, you should keep repeating Step 6 until he's been putting his head in comfortably for at least several consecutive sessions. Or, for safety purposes, work on the operant counterconditioning steps in the next section prior to putting the GL on.



Fig.V

Fig.V, Step 7b: Give additional treats to keep him distracted and to continue building a positive association. Take off the GL before your dog is irritated or distracted by it.

Part 2: Training the dog that placing his head into the head collar earns rewards. (Switching from classical to operant counterconditioning.)

Perform these additional steps with dogs who already have an aversion to things being placed around their muzzle. These steps will ensure that they enjoy wearing the head collar.



Fig.W

Fig.W, Step 1a: Once your dog is comfortable having you put on the GL with treats present, wean him off the treats by first switching to operant counterconditioning. As always, hold the GL away from your dog at first.



Fig.X

Fig.X, Step 1b: Then present the GL without treats. If your dog is ready for this step, he'll immediately stick his nose through the loop. This indicates his understanding of the association between the GL and treats.



Fig.Y

Fig.Y, Step 1c: Once he shoves his nose through, immediately reward him with treats. Then remove the GL and repeat.



Fig.Z



Fig.AA

Fig.Z, AA, Step 2: Turn the training process into a game by running several steps away from your dog with the GL in your hand and then placing it within reach of your dog. Your dog should rush after you to push his nose into the loop. When he does, reward him with treats. When he consistently runs after the GL and sticks his nose in, then you can put the GL on.

Part 3: Potential problems



Fig.BB



Fig.CC



Fig.DD

Fig.BB, Example 1a, Incorrect: This dog has shoved his nose over the GL and pushed it aside to get the treat.

Fig.CC, Example 1b, Incorrect: This occurred because the treat was placed too far to the side.

Fig.DD, Example 1c, Correct: Be sure to place the treat in the center and hold the GL steady so that your dog can get his muzzle through the loop.



Fig.EE



Fig.FF

Fig.EE, Example 2a, Incorrect: Instead of reaching for the treat, the dog is standing stationary. This indicates that we've attempted to progress too quickly. He does not want to stick his nose through. Go back to an earlier step and hold the treat flush with the loop or in front of it.

Fig.FF, Example 2b, Correct: If you make the mistake of trying too much too soon, remove the GL and treats, and next time present the treats in such a way that your dog doesn't need to extend his nose through the loop as far. Additionally, you can walk away so that it's clear to your dog that he loses the opportunity to earn treats. You can even have a play session before starting the training session again to get him into a happy emotional state.

These steps may seem tedious but the process is actually quite fast. By spending just a few sessions, you can ensure that a head collar becomes a handy tool that your dog enjoys and that can provide you with the ability to control his head, thereby helping you keep him safe.