Training Cats and Dogs to Love Being Petted or Groomed

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 so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet to remain stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

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

Part 1: Classical Counterconditioning: Pairing activity and reward

For most pet owners, petting and grooming is a task that they perform with their pets on a daily basis. Grooming is especially important among certain breeds, both cats and dogs, in which it is essential for the the overall health of the animal. In this handout, I will demonstrate how to train your pet to enjoy being groomed or petted. This process is the same for cats and dogs and can be used for petting, brushing, or even trimming your pet's hair with clippers.

Fig.A

Fig.B

Fig.A, Step 1: Groom a specific location or at a specific level of pressure, with your dog's mouth physically on your hand eating treats the entire time. At first, feed enough kibble or treats to last about 5 seconds.
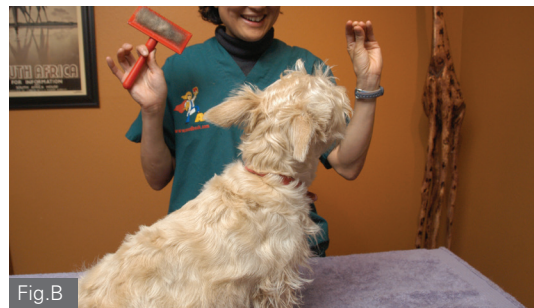
Fig.B, Step 2: As your dog is finishing the last treat (or kibble), remove both the brush and the treat hand so that it's clear that both the treats and the grooming are no longer accessible. Repeat this procedure until your dog is comfortable being groomed in this region of the body at this level of pressure for at least 5 times in succession.

Fig.C

Fig.C, Step 3: Next, groom a different area starting with light pressure, or groom the same area with heavier pressure.

Fig.D

Fig.D, Step 4: Again, stop the treats and the grooming at the same time. In this manner, gradually increase the intensity or pressure of the grooming and slowly move to different areas of the body. You should be able to groom fairly vigorously as long as you never cross your dog's stimulus threshold.

Next you can go to brushing for 1 second or more before pairing it with treats, or you can go to operant counterconditioning.

Part 2: Operant counterconditioning: Separate activity then give reward

Fig.E

Fig.E, Step 1: Groom one area for about 5 seconds. Groom it for a short enough time period and at a light enough pressure that your dog never reacts aversely.

Fig.F

Fig.F, Step 2: When your dog holds still for grooming and shows no signs of struggling or aggression, reward her immediately with a treat. Repeat this 5 times in succession in the same location or with the same brush pressure; if she still remains calm, move on to a different area or a heavier brush pressure.

Fig.G

Fig.H

Fig.G, Step 3: When brushing in a new area or with heavier brush pressure, remember to always stay below the level that will cause your dog to react.

Fig.H, Step 4: Stop brushing and reward your dog. Make the first brush bouts short (5 seconds) so that your dog does not have much time to become irritated. This will also help her learn that sitting still for grooming leads to treats. If you have to put the brush down to give treats, then it's best to teach your dog (beforehand) that a marker word—such as "yes" spoken in a lively fashion—means a treat is coming. Do this by holding treats behind your back, saying "yes" and immediately delivering the treat to your dog. Repeat this 10-20 times per session. If you are good at delivering the treats suddenly and making your dog wait expectantly in between treats, she will quickly learn that "yes" predicts that a treat will come. It will come to signal her that she's performed a correct behavior and a treat is on the way. This will allow you a short delay between the correct behavior and the presentation of the food reward.

WHAT'S WRONG HERE?

Fig.I
INCORRECT

Fig.J

Fig.I, Example 1, Incorrect: This dog is avoiding the brush here. Brushing in this way will sensitize your dog to grooming, worsening her behavior and setting back your training. If she reacts this way, either stop the session and try later—this time being more careful—or try going back to a lower-level brushing stimulus or higher-valued treats.

Fig.J, Example 2a, Incorrect: Holding the treat out too far can cause your pet to move all over the table and thus teach her to become unmanageable and wiggly while you groom.
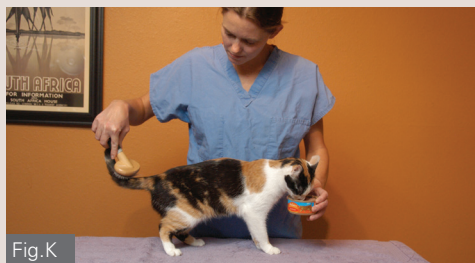

Fig.K

Fig.K, Example 2b, Correct: Now the technician holds the treats in a location that keeps this cat stationary.

Part 3: Using the Treat and Train™ to countercondition

The Treat and Train, an automated treat dispenser, offers a convenient way to countercondition. Set the machine to release treats at a certain interval and then time the brushing to coincide with your pet's snacking.

Classical counterconditioning with the Treat and Train™

Fig.L

Fig.L, Step 1: Set the Treat and Train™ to "multi-treat" (to dispense 5 treats in succession) and set the treat rate to 10 or 15 seconds. The machine will dispense 5 treats every 10-15 seconds. Now set the ratio switch to "fixed" so that each session lasts 1 minute. Finally, press the "down-stay" button so that the treats will start dispensing as per your settings. Only brush when your dog's nose is physically in contact with the food bowl as she eats the treats out of it.

Fig.M

Fig.M, Step 2: Once the fifth treat has been released, stop brushing so that it's clear to your dog that brushing is associated with the treats. Be sure to stay under the level that irritates your dog.

Fig.N

Fig.N, Step 3: Repeat the procedure at the same brush pressure or same spot on your dog 5 times in succession before moving to a different area of fur or increasing the brush pressure. That way, you're sure your dog understands the connection between brushing and food.

Fig.O

Fig.O: Always stop before your dog responds aversely. Note that your dog moving away from you could be an aversive reaction. You might want to place a hand on her to guide her or have her lie down so that she remains stationary.

Operant counterconditioning with the Treat and Train™

Fig.P

Fig.Q

Fig.P, Step 1: When you can groom your dog anywhere on her body at the necessary level of pressure, switch to operant counterconditioning. Groom yourdog for a short period (5 seconds). Ideally, because your dog knows she will get treats, she'll be paying more attention to the machine than to your grooming.

Fig.Q, Step 2: Stop grooming and dispense one or more treats from the Treat and Train™. The advantage of giving treats by machine is that your dog will remain oriented toward the Treat and Train™ between treats instead of moving to face you. Systematically increase the amount of time you brush prior to rewarding your dog.

An alternative method of using the Treat and Train™ is to set the machine to give a single treat every 3 seconds at a fixed rate. When doing this, at first brush only as your dog is eating a treat (e.g., her head is in the Treat and Train™ bowl). At the rate at which it's set, you'll get 20 opportunities to brush every minute. Then begin to brush more firmly as your dog eats. When your dog is non-reactive with this type of brushing, brush at more random intervals as treats are being dispensed. That is, do not time your brushing to occur only as your dog's head is in the bowl. When you can brush at the heaviest level of pressure necessary with treats coming every 3 seconds and your dog ignoring the grooming, increase the interval between treats. Intervals can be increased to 5, 7, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 45, 60 and 300 seconds. Thus, you can systematically increase the intervals between treats, usually doing so within several 3-minute sessions.

After following these steps, your pet will enjoy being petted or groomed and it will make those daily sessions a more pleasant experience for both you and your pet.