

behavior modification protocols

One of a series of ASPCA® Behavior Modification Protocols developed by Emily Weiss, Ph.D., CAAB and Heather Mohan-Gibbons, MS, RVT, CPDT, ACAAB



working with touch-sensitive dogs

The goal is to decrease reactivity to touch.

program instructions:

1. Identify where the dog is touch-sensitive by reviewing the SAFER™ assessment and notes along with any other available information (relinquishment survey, vet exam, notes from kennel staff and volunteers).
2. Define your goals. Is your goal for the dog to be completely non-reactive, even to a strong tail pull? Is it for the dog to remain relaxed and open-mouthed even when he is restrained for a vet hold? Write down your goal behavior; then note where the dog is now with regard to the goal behavior. Plot the distance between the starting place and the goal, and then break that distance down into easy-to-achieve steps. Start at step one and use the behavior log to keep track of progress.
3. Identify what the dog finds motivating. Let the dog tell you how he wants to be “paid” for learning new behavior. Have a variety of rewards on hand: liver treats, hot dogs, cheese, tennis balls. Track what the dog prefers on the Behavior Log. Reward with higher value treats when the dog gives a particularly relaxed response and as you get closer to the touch sensitive area. Otherwise, vary the treats so the dog never knows what’s coming.
4. Introduce the dog to a conditioned reinforcer such as a clicker or the word “yes.” Refer to Clicker Training protocol included in this chapter (page 52).
5. Begin by touching the dog in a place where you know he is not sensitive. You want to start far away from the sensitive area and move closer over time (multiple sessions) while he stays non-reactive. For example, if the dog head flipped when you touched his flank area during the Sensitivity item, begin training by first touching his shoulder. This way you’ll be setting him up for success — a light touch on the shoulder should bring about a non-reactive response, and you will click and treat that response. The sequence is this: You touch, dog stays relaxed, click, and then treat. Repeat often. Go slowly and work at each level (refer to your goal and easy-to-achieve steps) with the dog relaxed. You know you have moved too quickly if the dog changes from relaxed to stiff behavior. If that happens, do not correct the dog; instead view it as feedback that he is not ready for you to go that quickly. Make note of where it was that you touched him when he became stiffer, go back one step, and continue the session. End each session on a positive note.
6. Progress at a slow pace, paying attention to feedback given to you by the dog, towards the goal behavior. You may choose to vary the speed, pressure or location of the touch depending on your goal. If you choose to vary the touch, ensure that each variance is tried independently. Do not try to train them all at once. It may take weeks before the dog meets the goal behavior. Be patient and remember to take it slow.

when the dog is adopted: Review the “Touch Sensitivity” instructions with the adopter which can be found in the Reproducible Forms and Templates section. Remember to follow up with the adopter at three days, three weeks and three months post-adoption.

touch sensitivity ASPCA® guidelines to assimilate your new companion

Congratulations! You have adopted a new family member.

As your adoption coordinator discussed with you, your dog didn't always accept all kinds of touching. This dog indicated to us during his behavior assessment that he might act aggressively if he was pushed beyond his comfort level. Your dog has had some training help to help him be more comfortable with touch. Being comfortable with different types of touch is important and is a skill you can help him continue to learn at home.

What does this mean? Your dog is more likely to show anxiety or aggression when being touched on certain body parts, with a certain pressure or strength, or when being touched at the same time that you are holding his collar. Any dog may also have his own preferences with a human. We will be throughout to continue the training in your home. We strongly suggest you follow the guidelines below working with the first dog you bring to home. It is possible to retrain your dog past this behavior issue with time, patience and practice.



guidelines:

- **Be aware of the touches your dog enjoys and doesn't enjoy.** Your dog has shown sensitivity to certain touches. Since you know where your new dog is uncomfortable being touched, instruct family members and visitors to touch the dog areas he likes to be touched instead. For instance, “This is my new dog. Tickle. He would love it if you would squish noses and pet his chest. That's his favorite place to be touched.” If every new person he meets pets him appropriately, it will help him relax when being touched.

- **Reward your dog for accepting touch.** This will convince your dog that tolerating touch pays off and his behavior is worth repeating. Have a baggy of tiny, soft, high-value treats like hot dogs, semi-moist liver treats, cheese or dried liver cut into pieces the size of a pea. Put your hand on your dog and while touching him, feed him a treat. You are teaching your dog that accepting touch and remaining relaxed pays off.

- **Refrain from engaging in wrestling or physical rough-housing with your dog.** While some dogs may enjoy this as much as many humans do, a touch-sensitive dog will almost certainly find this unpleasant. Don't undo all your hard work! Play cooperative games instead, like fetch, find-it games (like hide and seek), living room agility, or teach him some tricks.

If you are unable to do these at-home exercises, we suggest you choose another dog to adopt. We want you to be safe, and the dog to be able to work through his issues. Please think this through and ask yourself if you have the time and motivation to help this dog learn to enjoy touch.