

Helping Dogs Overcome Grooming Issues

By Sarah Fisher

Grooming issues can arise for several reasons. The dog may have had a bad experience at a grooming parlour, may have been roughly handled as a pup, may be body sensitive due to injury or disease or may simply be unaccustomed to being touched over every part of his body. As behaviours are linked, dogs that have grooming issues may also find containment difficult (which includes being on a lead or wearing a harness or dog coat), and usually dislike being towel dried. They may also be timid or defensive around strangers and other dogs and fearful of being examined by a vet. The beauty of TTouch is that it will help to address all the associated behaviours as well as enabling grooming to become a pleasurable experience for all concerned.

Stroking the dog all over the body with a variety of textures (ensuring that the equipment does not get caught in any matted hair) can be a valuable starting point particularly if the dog is worried by direct hand contact. You can use a wand, a soft artists water colour brush, a feather, a wand with a body wrap wound around the end and so on. Quiet, calm behaviour can be marked with a clicker and some yummy treats so that the dog learns that contact on the body is something to look forward to and not anything to fear.

Keep each session short and do not try to achieve too much in one go. Several short sessions are going to be far more effective than one long session.

When you are ready to progress to direct hand contact, start by stroking the dog with the back of the fingers or the back of the hand, depending on the size of the dog and the area on which you are working. If the dog is happy, start moving the skin slowly in one and a quarter circles with the back of the fingers/hand. You can then turn your hand over and use different TTouches such as the Clouded Leopard TTouch or Raccoon TTouch to work all over the dogs body. You may also need to handle the actual hair so that he becomes used to the sensation of the hair moving. Gently take a small piece of hair at the root and slowly slide your fingers out to the tip. You need to make sure that you stroke the hair in the direction in which it grows so that the hair remains in a straight line from the follicle right to the tip. This will minimise the pull on the skin. You can also try sliding your fingers into the coat and moving the skin and coat in slow, one and a quarter circles.

Ensure that you watch your dogs responses at all times and if your dog is concerned about being touched on a certain part of his body, go back to the places where hand contact was more acceptable. Build your dogs confidence over a few short sessions and try to stop the session before your dog indicates that he has had enough. It can be extremely tempting to keep working to see how far you can go but if you can work below the threshold at which your dog has to react you will gain his trust more quickly and help him to learn that grooming can be a pleasant experience.

If your dog is concerned by direct hand contact you can cover your hand with

a large, thermal sock or a sheepskin mitt. This is an important step for dogs that dislike being groomed even if they are not worried about being touched as it helps them to change any negative associations they may have with grooming brushes. You can also try doing TTouches with a soft, rubber brush such as a jelly scrubber which are often more acceptable for dogs that are worried by brushes. Small heated pads such as hand warmers placed inside socks to ensure that they do not burn the dog can also be of use to relax the soft tissue. Again you will need to ensure that you do not catch his coat with any of the tools as this will obviously reinforce his fears about being groomed. Remember you can mark all calm responses with a clicker and treats.

Build slowly over several sessions until your dog is happy to be handled all over his body. You can use the jelly scrubber and/or sheepskin mitt to alternate between the circular TTouches and slow sweeping slides over his body to accustom him to the sensation of being brushed. Again make sure that you aren't going to be pulling on matted hair.

If you need to trim out knots before brushing, use the Raccoon TTouches around the base of the mat and slowly circle the knotted hair if it is long so that the dog becomes used to the sensation of his hair moving. If he has been worried about scissors in the past, break it down into easy steps. Stroke him all over with the handles of the scissors as you did with the paintbrush, feather etc. Tape up the sharp ends and stroke him with the blades as well. Progress to working on one matt at a time, doing the Raccoon TTouches, circling the hair, then snipping out the knot and remember to breathe when you are working with your dog. Holding your breath or rushing will cause tension in your hand which will concern him.

You may also need to invest in new grooming equipment. Hard brushes and combs can be extremely uncomfortable for some dogs particularly as they age and this can be where the problem started. Even if you do need to use slightly firmer brushes, alternate between grooming your dog and doing slow TTouches with your hand or the mitt or jelly scrubber rather than trying to brush him all over his body in one go. Breaking a grooming session down in this way is likely to be far less threatening and therefore far more acceptable.

Many dogs (and cats) that could not be groomed have been helped with this simple, common sense approach.

