

KINDRED PAWS

ANIMAL TRAINING



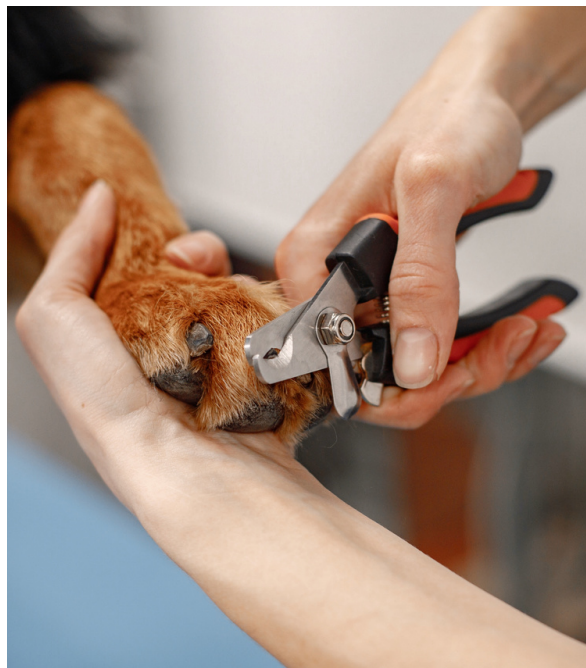
Conditioning your dog to enjoy nail clipping

Fear is a very strong emotion, and dogs naturally are not fans on having procedures done to them. However, we can train our dogs to not only allow and put up with, but actually enjoy and actively participate in getting their nail clipped. This is important whether you plan on cutting your dog's nails yourself, or hiring someone else to do it for you.

Training a dog to have a positive emotional response to something they do not have prior experience with (e.g. introducing a new puppy to nail clipping), is called 'conditioning'. For dogs that already have a negative emotional response, we use 'counter conditioning'. The process is basically the same, however for dogs that already hate nail clipping, we typically need to go slower and take smaller steps.

The key to success in conditioning is reading your dog's body language accurately, and letting them determine the pace. Keep an eye on any small signs of stress (things like lip licking, yawning, turning their head and avoidance). If you need help identifying these signs, read our sheet on dog body language and calming signals.

Make a plan to do a little bit of conditioning at least every few days. Keep your conditioning sessions short to avoid a build up of stress. Some dogs may be okay with 5 minutes, others might only handle a minute.



The next page will discuss where to start. some of the potential steps you may need to include in your conditioning plan., and some extra tips for success.

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Getting started

Where you start is determined by your dog. For most dogs, we may start by building a positive and calm foundation in handling their paws. Without even having nail clippers present, we want our dogs to trust us handling their paw for a duration of a few minutes.

I recommend teaching your dog a cue like 'shake' or 'paw', so they have a level of consent in the process (as opposed to just grabbing their paw). You may find success in teaching your dog to go into a position like laying on their side, laying on their back between your legs, or standing, to give you easier access to all their paws. Use rewards like treats and calm pats/massage to create a positive association to these actions.



When touching your dog's paw, look out for any signs of stress, even minor ones. If your dog signals that they don't like it, we need to improve the experience for them. This may mean making it more enjoyable by changing the way we touch them, or feeding tastier food during the process.

For a dog that is uncomfortable due to prior negative experiences, it is common for them to not like anyone touching their paws. Use a cue like 'shake' or 'paw' and build duration in the action by feeding treats while they choose to keep their paws on your hand. If they pull away, stop the rewards and cue again. Only do this in short sessions as the process can be very stressful early on. As they build trust in this, begin to include more massaging of the paws. I recommend starting with one paw (which they choose to give you), and then cue the their other paws and do the same process once they are more comfortable.

Extra tip: Pick times when your dog is calmer and not playful. Aim to towards using this touching time to encourage a relaxed state of mind (think massage at a spa). It may take you a few weeks before your dog is comfortable with this. But continue practicing in small sessions to build up your dog confidence and joy in this bonding time.

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Introducing clippers

When we introduce nail clippers into the picture, we need to take it slow. We are not going to rush into cutting nails. For puppies and dogs with no prior experiences, we can show them the clippers, let them sniff and investigate (but not chew), and give them a reward to create positive associations.

For dogs that run away at the sight of nail clippers, we may place the clippers on the ground and sit a few meters from them. You can either put food around the clippers, or feed treats from your hand. The idea here is the dog notices the clippers, and then something good happens. If you are too close to the clippers, your dog may not trust you to come near to get food. This is called 'counter conditioning' - we have another sheet on this in detail if you are struggling with this process. Over time, we slowly get closer to the clippers, until we can sit on the ground, pull the clippers out and put them on the ground, and your dog will come up for food. After that, we begin holding the clippers in our hand while feeding treats.

Extra tip: To ensure that the clippers are seen as the predictor of good things, we need to make sure your timing is right. Hold treats in one hand and the clippers in the other and hold both behind your back. Present the clippers first, then the treats a second or two after. Put both hands back behind your back at the same time after feeding a few treats.

Next steps

Each progression you make will be determined by your dog. As we move into bringing the clippers towards your dog's paw, touching the nail, and eventually cutting the nails, you will need to progress at a rate that your dog is comfortable. If you progress to a step that your dog doesn't like, you either go back a step and continue to build up trust and positive associations, or, you can get creative and perhaps find a smaller step in the right direction your dog is okay with.

The next page has a list of *goals* (not direct steps as every dog is different) for you to aim towards. You may find your dog skips through these goals quickly, or that you need to add in extra steps between each one.

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Goals: Your dog is comfortable with...

- offering their paw or getting into a suitable position to provide access to their paws
- you touching a paw for a few seconds
- you touching a paw for a few minutes
- you touching all their paws for a few minutes
- you touching and massaging all their paws for a few minutes
- the clippers being present (e.g. in the room)
- the clippers being close by (e.g. next to you)
- the clippers being in your hand
- you touching their paws, while also having the clippers near by
- you touching their paws, while also holding the clippers
- you touching their paws, while bringing the nail clippers towards their paw
- tapping their nail gently with the clippers
- scrapping the bottom of their nail with the clippers
- clipping a small bit on one nail
- clipping a few small bits on one nail
- clipping multiple nails on one paw
- clipping one nail on a different paw
- clipping multiple nails on all paws
- clipping all their nails

Remember these are goals, not steps. You may find you spend longer working towards one goal compared to another. However, don't skip ahead in your goals as reaching confidence in a prior situation is necessary for the next.

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Extra tip: it can be hard to reward at the right time when both your hands are in use (e.g. holding a paw and holding clippers). Using a verbal reward marker like ‘yes’ makes this process much easier (see our sheet on marker training on how to do this). Alternatively, verbal praise like ‘good’ in the moment, followed by a treat, may work for some dogs.

Extra tip: for some dogs, they may need their nails clipped before you can condition the entire process. Try to avoid forcing them to get their nails clipped, as this pushes your progress back. If you must, have another person do the clipping, or have it done under sedation at the vet. In the meantime, we can try to maintain the nails through methods your dog is more comfortable with, such as walking on rough surfaces, training to use a scratch board, or conditioning to a nail file or dremel (particularly useful for dogs that are fearful of clippers with no prior experiences with dremels).

If you need more help with conditioning your dog to nail clipping, reach out on my website for personalised training.