Clipping Nails Using “Pawsitive” Reinforcement

Part One:

Clipping your dog’s nails can seem like an insurmountable task if he is frightened by the process and reacts aggressively towards the clippers (and to the hand holding them!). But clipping his nails doesn’t have to end in a fight. By using positive reinforcement and gradually shaping his behaviour to reflect what you want, you can train your dog to not only endure having his nails clipped but even enjoy it.

Whether you realize it or not, if you own a dog you are an animal trainer. Your dog learns something every time you interact with him; you either teach him new behaviours or you reinforce his previously-learned behaviours. This can be a somewhat daunting realization, but it’s also fantastic to think that we can teach our dog to do anything!

First things first: what is positive reinforcement?

Put simply, positive reinforcement is the addition of something pleasurable that rewards a specific behaviour. It is an extremely effective method of training because behaviours that are followed by a reward are more likely to occur again in the future. In dog training, positive reinforcement could take the form of praise (“Good Boy!”), petting your dog’s head, letting him play with a toy, or giving him a small treat. In this case, we are going to use treats because they are highly motivating for most dogs. The response we are looking for in this situation is your dog not reacting aggressively to having his nails clipped, so we will reward him when he is relaxed and does not respond to the nail clippers.

This is the first installment of a two-part series. Now that you have learned what positive reinforcement is and why it is an effective training method, check back next month to learn the steps you will need to take to train your dog to have his nails clipped.

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Part Two:

Last month we learned that positive reinforcement is the *addition of something pleasurable that rewards a specific behaviour.* We learned that dogs are more likely to repeat a behaviour if they are rewarded for it, and we discussed that small treats are the most motivating reward for your dog in this exercise.

It will be easiest if you have a helper to assist with this training session. You should hold your dog (if he’s small enough) or sit next to him and have a large supply of small treats readily available. Your assistant will hold the clippers.

Step 1: Hold your dog and supply him with a few treats until he becomes focused on you and comfortable with his surroundings.

Step 2: While feeding your dog treats, have your assistant briefly touch the dog’s paw. He should remain focused on you and distracted enough by the treats that he will not worry about the assistant. Repeat this step until he becomes obviously comfortable with your assistant touching his paw. Make sure that you reward him only when he is relaxed. Gradually increase the amount of time the assistant handles his paw.

Step 3: Next, while feeding your dog treats, have your assistant briefly touch the dog’s nail. Again, he should remain focused on you and not react to the assistant. Reward relaxation. Repeat as necessary.

Step 4: Following along the same pattern, have your assistant now touch the dog’s nail with the clippers.

Step 5: Have the assistant place the nail inside the clipper.

Step 6: Clip the nail.

If you have been patient and repeated each of the steps as necessary to keep the dog comfortable and relaxed, it should now not be a problem to clip the dog’s nails. If your dog becomes worried or anxious during any of the steps, you may need to return to the previous step again and make him comfortable with that before advancing, or you may need to divide the steps into even smaller increments. You want to slowly shape the behaviour so that he never has the opportunity to become scared and aggressive again! It may only take one session to make your dog comfortable with this process or it may take many sessions—be ready to adjust your expectations. Always make sure you end training sessions on a positive note before the dog loses interest and while the game is still fun!