

## Handling Sensitivity in Dogs

### Why play handling games with your dog?

Many dogs develop handling sensitivity over their lifetime. This can happen with dogs of any age. Teach your dog to love all kinds of handling, including collar handling, nail trims, and being held or lifted by pairing handling with high-value foods such as small pieces of cheese or chicken. This process is referred to as *counterconditioning and desensitization*, because it teaches your dog to love physical touch!



### Addressing Handling Sensitivity

Ensure you make these commitments to your dog before, during, and after any kind of handling:

**Commitment #1: Your dog must feel safe!** Allow your dog freedom of movement during handling. Let them opt out of the activity if they so choose.

**Commitment #2: Stop if your dog becomes distressed.** Use gentle touch. Only increase pressure if your dog remains [relaxed and cooperative](#).

**Commitment #3: Touch, then treat.** Give your dog a treat after handling, not before. Be careful not to use food to lure your dog towards you so that you can handle them.

### Collar Handling

**Step 1.** Reach for your dog's collar. Gently take a hold of the collar with two fingers.

**Step 2.** Remove your hand and give your dog a small piece of their favorite treat.

**Step 3.** Repeat these steps several times; reaching for and holding different parts of their collar.

### Paw Handling

**Step 1.** Gently touch your dog's paw. Keep this very short and sweet!

**Step 2.** Remove your hand and give your dog a small piece of their favorite treat.

**Step 3.** Repeat these steps several times, gradually touching for longer and feeling toe pads.

### Ear Handling

**Step 1.** Gently touch your dog's ear. Touch as gently as possible so that your dog doesn't mind.

**Step 2.** Remove your hand and give your dog a small piece of their favorite treat.

**Step 3.** Repeat these steps several times. Work up to looking inside your dog's ear.

**Training Tip #1:** If your dog is demonstrating discomfort with these handling games, take a step back. Start by rewarding gentle touches to areas that are near to your dog's sensitive spot.

**Training Tip #2:** Seek the assistance of a qualified, reward-based trainer if your dog's handling sensitivities continue, worsen, or if your dog has multiple handling sensitivities.

**Training Tip #3:** The exercises above can be made more efficient through [Clicker Training](#).

For more resources, check out <https://sfhumanesociety.org/behavior-library/>