

# Positive Pedi-Pedi's

*Three force-free nail-trimming procedures to try on your dog.*

BY PAT MILLER, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC

Nail-trimming used to be so simple. You found a stalwart friend or family member to restrain your dog tightly while you quickly clipped his nails in spite of his struggles, trying not to “quick” him (by cutting a nail too short and making it bleed), which made him struggle harder each time. If you ran out of stalwart friends, you started dropping your dog off at your vet’s office for nail clipping – out of sight, out of mind! He came back seemingly none the worse for wear – until your vet told you that they would need to start sedating him to trim his nails, after he tried to bite one of the techs. Hmm . . . maybe not so simple after all.

For owners and trainers who have come to value relationships with dogs that are based on cooperation rather than coercion, forcible-restraint nail-trims are a thing of the past. Muscle-power has given way to brain-power as the primary tool for clipping canine nails. Our job, as humans who choose to live our lives in

peaceful partnership with our dogs, is to make creative use of our grey matter to figure out how to get our canine companions to enjoy nail trimming – or at least to be relaxed and cooperative about it.

When positive reinforcement was new to the dog training world, we hadn’t yet gotten creative with the nail-

trimming challenge; we almost always used counter-conditioning to convince the dog that nail trimming was a good thing. Since then, smart trainers have come up with *new* ideas; these days there’s even less justification for manhandling your dog into submission for his pedicure. At my spring 2012 Peaceable Paws Behavior Modification Academy, trainers implemented three distinctly different methods to help their dogs overcome an aversion to nail trimming. Check them out!

## 1 COUNTER-CONDITIONING FOR CONVENTIONAL NAIL-TRIMMING

There is nothing wrong with using this old standby to help your dog love a pedicure. It’s the method selected by Academy trainer Valerie Balwanz of the Dogg House, Charlottesville, Virginia, for her Beagle-mix, Trixie.

Classical conditioning, also called Pavlovian conditioning, is a long-established principle of behavior science: creating an association between two stimuli in order to affect behavior. Many dogs are classically conditioned to *dislike* nail trimming, thanks to the scary restraint and accidental nail-quicking.

Counter-conditioning pairs nail trimming with one or more things your dog loves, so he comes to associate the procedure with *good* things instead of bad. A counter-conditioning protocol might start with simply picking up the clippers (or grinder) in one hand and feeding the dog a very high value treat from the other – and this is repeated until the act of picking up the clipper makes your dog’s tail wag and eyes light up as he searches for the expected goodie. You gradually move the clipper toward the dog, eventually touching him with it, all the while working to maintain the positive association: nail clipper/grinder makes really good stuff happen!

A separate, equally important procedure includes conditioning the dog to love having you touch (and eventually hold) his paw. Finally, you put the two together – the now-beloved clippers touch the now-comfortably-held paw – and eventually, a nail is clipped. (See “Counter-Conditioning for Nail Trimming,” next page.)

Valerie used counter-conditioning with Trixie, who had long been sensitive

Valerie Balwanz uses counter-conditioning to change her dog's response to the stimuli of nail clippers, having her paw held, and finally, having her nails clipped.



to having her paws touched. By Day 5 of the Academy, Trixie was offering her paw to be held, and gaining a positive association with the clippers. Valerie continued with her training, and reports that she is now trimming Trixie's nails with ease.

## 2 COUNTER-CONDITIONING FOR NON-TRADITIONAL TRIMMING

Somewhere along the line, dog people decided it was necessary to hold a dog's paw securely (tightly) in order to trim the nails. But it really isn't so. You can teach your dog to voluntarily offer a paw and hold it still for trimming – and avoid having to counter-condition the restraint part of the procedure. (Of course, you still have to condition your dog to love the nail trimmer or grinder).

This was the method selected by Academy trainer Steve Buckmann of Bloomington, Indiana, with his foster

**Steve Buckman used "shaping" to teach his dog, Apple, to lie down with her paws on his leg, and then to accept the touch of clippers on her nails, and then to accept restraint-free nail clipping in this position.**

dog Apple, a lovely young hound. Steve sat on the floor next to Apple, and used "shaping" (reinforcing small pieces of the behavior to build the complete behavior) to teach her to place her paws on his leg. (For more information about shaping, see "The Shape of Things to Come," WDJ March 2006.) In that position her nails were easy to clip. By Day 5 of the Academy, Steve was happily and carefully clipping his cooperative dog's nails.

This is also the method I use with my Corgi, Lucy, who used to hate the sight of the clippers. I used counter-conditioning to help Lucy overcome her strong dislike of being touched on her



legs and body. After we had completed her paw/nail clipper-touch protocol, I did the following:

- Told Lucy to "Down" and "Wait."

## A COUNTER-CONDITIONING PROTOCOL FOR NAIL TRIMMING

**1** Determine the location of touch your dog can tolerate without reacting fearfully or aggressively. Perhaps it's her shoulder, perhaps her elbow, or maybe her knee. She should be a little worried, but not growl or try to move away. This is called the threshold.

**2** With your dog on-leash, touch her briefly and gently at threshold. The instant your dog notices the touch, start feeding bits of chicken, non-stop.

**3** After a second or two, remove the touch and stop feeding chicken.

**4** Keep repeating steps 1-3 until touching at that location for 1-2 seconds consistently causes your dog to look at you with a happy smile and a "Yay! Where's my chicken?" expression. This is a conditioned emotional response (CER) – your dog's association with the brief touch at that location is now positive instead of negative.

**5** Now increase the intensity of the stimulus by increasing the length of time you touch her at that same location, a few seconds at a time, obtaining a new CER at each new time period before increasing the time again. For example, several repetitions at 2-4 seconds, until you get consistent "Yay!" looks, then several repetitions at 4-8 seconds, then several at 8-12 seconds, etc., working for that consistent CER at each new duration of your touch.

**6** When you can touch her at that spot for any length of time with her in "Yay" mode, begin to increase the intensity of stimulus again, this time by moving your hand to a new location, 1-2 inches lower than your initial threshold. I suggest starting at your initial touch location and sliding your hand to the new spot, rather than just touching the new spot. Continue with repetitions until you get consistent CERs at the new location.

**7** Continue gradually working your way down to your dog's paw, an inch or two at a time, getting solid CERs at each spot before you move closer to the paw.

**8** When you get below the knee, also add a gentle grasp and a little pressure; each is a separate step in the CC&D procedure. Continue working down the leg, all the way to the paw.

**9** When you can touch grasp, and put pressure on the paw, add lifting the paw.

**10** If your goal is *happy* nail trimming, start the process over, this time with the nail clipper or grinder in hand. Show the clipper to your dog and feed a treat, again and again, until the appearance of the clipper or grinder elicits a "Yay!" response. Then counter-condition the clipper action (squeezing the clippers) or the sound of the grinder. Go through the whole touch sequence again, this time with the clipper in your hand, also touching her with the clipper; then again while you squeeze the clipper. Remember that you are still feeding yummy treats and obtaining CERs throughout the whole process. When you can hold her paw and make the clipper action right next to her nail with a happy response, clip one nail, feed *lots* of treats, and stop. Do a nail a day until she's happy with that, then advance to two nails at a time, then three, until you can clip all her nails in one session.

The more complex the stimulus, the more successful the dog's avoidance or aggressive strategies have been, and the more intense the emotional response, the more challenging the behavior is to modify. Take your time. Be patient. A few more weeks – or months – of long nails isn't going to hurt anyone, and the result – a canine family member who willingly participates in the nail trimming procedure – is well worth the effort.

(When she lies down her nails are more accessible than when she sits.)

- Placed a yummy treat 12 inches in front of her nose.
- Clipped one nail.
- Told her "Take it!" so she could jump up and eat the treat.
- Repeated the previous steps for the next nail.

She now adores the nail clipping procedure, and I clip multiple nails in between "Take it!" cues, always keeping it random so she never knows which nail clip will result in the "Take it!" cue.

### 3 OPERANT CONDITIONING FOR NAIL TRIMMING

Perhaps your dog truly hates the nail clippers, a grinder sends him trembling under the bed, and he'd prefer you leave his paws alone, thank you. You may want to select a nail-trimming procedure that requires neither restraint nor clippers by teaching him to file his own nails.

Positive trainer M. Shirley Chong of

Grinnell, Iowa, suggests this method: Teach your dog to paw at a sandpaper-covered board to file his own nails. (See "Canine Emery Board Training," below.) Shaping a dog to file his own front paws is pretty simple. I had already done this procedure with my Scorgidoodle, Bonnie, who loves shaping games and hated nail trimming, despite lots of counter-conditioning work.

Bonnie quickly became quite adept at filing her own front nails, but I had never pursued shaping a scraping behavior with her hind paws. Academy student Gina Burger, of Carthage, Missouri, elected to try this with Bonnie.

It proved to be a challenge. If your dog scrapes his hind paws on the ground after eliminating, you can capture the behavior with a click and treat as he scrapes. Bonnie doesn't scrape.

She was, however, happily willing to move her hind feet in all sorts of ways. Gina tried putting emery boards flat on the floor, and then at various angles to try to elicit even a tiny scraping motion. The scrape proved to be elusive. Gina tried getting Bonnie to back up and then move forward. She tried clicking Bonnie for moving sideways, and reinforcing her

for moving straight. The week ended without success for the hind-foot nail-filing project. (Gina did, however, pass the course!)

I have since reconsidered the exercise. In my own shaping sessions with Bonnie, I've determined that an actual "scrape" isn't necessary – just movement that occurs while the nail is in contact with the abrasive paper. Bonnie moves side-to-side, wagging her tail and filing her nails in the process. Success!

Cooperation rather than coercion. Partnership rather than conflict. Voluntary participation rather than submission to force. Wagging, happy dogs rather than fearful, shut-down ones. What more could a dog – or a human – want? 🐾

*Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC, is WDJ's Training Editor. She lives in Fairplay, Maryland, site of her Peaceable Paws training center, where she offers dog training classes and courses for trainers. Pat is also author of many books on positive training. See page 24 for more information.*



## CANINE EMERY BOARD TRAINING

According to trainer M. Shirley Chong, the easiest way to trim a dog's nails is to have dogs trim their own nails. Chong says, "It's easy! Find a board about 8-12 inches wide (the wider the dog, the wider the nail file needs to be) and about 24-36 inches long. At a hardware store, get some of the stick-on tape that is used on wooden steps to make them slip-proof. It's rough, like extremely coarse sandpaper, and the adhesive lasts through anything. Cover the board with the slip-proof tape. You could also use sandpaper. The most important thing is to make sure the edges of the sandpaper are firmly glued down because otherwise the dog will peel it up. The adhesive used on the slip-proof tape won't budge for anything. You now have a giant nail file for dogs!

"Teach the dog to paw the board with his front feet. If you can get a paw touch and then deliberately delay the click, you're almost certain to get a raking motion. Once the dog starts pawing, he usually gets enthusiastic about it! Some dogs alternate feet as if they were digging, but it's not difficult to get a dog who uses only one foot to alternate.

"Some dogs prefer the board propped at an angle, other dogs prefer it flat on the floor. You can put a foot on one end of the board to keep it from slipping around.

"So far, it's been a cinch for everyone who has tried it to get a dog

to paw the board with his front feet. Capturing the hind leg kick that many dogs perform after pooping and then transferring it to the board is reportedly not difficult either.

The only caution I have is to put the board away where the dog can't reach it when not in use; some dogs who are left alone with the board quick their own nails and then get blood everywhere. And oddly enough, dogs do not seem to mind quicking their own nails on the board! My theory is that the sensation builds up slowly and so is not surprising the way it is when we do it. Keep a sharp eye out and stop proceedings when the dog is getting close to quicking his nails.

"If the dog started out with really long nails, the first few times he uses the board he is likely to file the nails unevenly and at funny angles. When the nails are shorter they will even out.

"I've been teaching people how to do this for more than 10 years and so far it's been very easy to train, even with handlers who had terrible timing. Plus, dogs seem to enjoy it a whole lot more than they enjoy nail trimming." – M. Shirley Chong  
shirleychong.com