

Canine University's Guide to Visiting the Vet

Preparing your dog to be a good patient means that your pet will get the very best care that your veterinarian has to offer, no matter where he goes and how he's feeling. Teaching your dog to be calm and easy to handle is essential in order for the staff to care for your dog especially if he is injured and not feeling well. Teaching your dog to like being restrained and handled no matter the circumstances, is a smart way to ensure that your local vet can help you if something goes wrong and your dog needs help.

As your pet's guardian, your dog is relying on you to build a good experience for him so that the vet and their staff are able to deliver their very best care. Here are some fun games to play to teach your dog to be calm and cooperative during your visit.

The Waiting Room

The expectation is for your dog to be calm and quiet, not visit other pets in the waiting area and ignore distractions, like children or other animals waiting their turn. Many pets do not feel well and are feeling nervous and anxious and many guardians are distracted and stressed as well. Having your dog be able to lay happily at your feet and not be distracted by other dogs or people, make it more pleasant for everyone and helps your dog associate the vet's office with good things.

Waiting Room Practice Game

This game can be used in the veterinary office, but is also great for taking your dog out for ice cream with your family or for house visitors or barbecues. Managing and teaching your dog how to act in these situations will pay off for years to come and you will have the added bonus of being able to take your dog anywhere.

Getting Started

Sit with your foot on the leash and reward your dog with small pieces of a treat for sitting quietly or laying at your feet. Try introducing distractions slowly, even if it's just that you're working or reading or talking on the phone while you play this game. This will get your dog used to maintaining a relaxed posture while you are otherwise engaged. Be sure to breathe deeply so that he learns to settle in and relax and vary the time between the treats (2-4 sec at first then vary once he's focusing on you), so he eventually settles in and just lays there.

Leave it/ While Laying At Your Feet !

Add in "leave it" practice while doing the above exercise so he learns to ignore the stuff happening around him as none of his business. If something really catches his attention and he can't be talked out of it with just touching the treat to his nose, then get up and walk him in a big circle to reset him and sit back down and try again. Experiment with the value of the treat, using the higher value with the bigger distractions.

Practice Tuck in and Go Around

Go Around & Lie Next to Me

Make a game out of moving your dog around the back of your chair to lie down beside you and reward him for holding the stay with small bits of a treat fed every few seconds at first. This will give you options for managing him in different outdoor places where you may want him a bit closer to you so you can help him deal with different distractions.

Tuck in & Lie Down

Use a treat to lure your dog to lay behind your calves, close to the chair. Reward your dog for holding the stay as you relax. Build upon the distractions, getting up and moving away if things going by are too much for him. This will help you manage your dog, boost his confidence and help him learn that his job is to relax with you.

Step Over Game

Use a treat to lure your dog over your stretched out legs so they are stepping over and between your legs back and forth. Break it down if they have trouble and reward any forward movement as you use a treat to lure them over. If they struggle with this, get them to move toward your leg, and then toss the treat away for them to go and chase. This will often loosen them up and make them braver to try again. Keep it fun and upbeat and don't be afraid to sit right on the floor and try to get things started and then move to a chair once they get the hang of it. This is a great way to burn energy for a wiggly young dog that isn't able to hold it together for long.

Cookie Drop Game

Just like it's says, take small pieces of a treat and drop it on the floor to keep your dog's attention on you and downward so he can't be staring at other dogs (people or cats). You can drop the cookie to either side of your feet or even under your legs or your chair to keep him busy. This game is great for getting your dog's attention away from distractions and channels his energy into a game that you control. This will improve his focus and attention to you.

Nose to Hand Game

Otherwise known as targeting, this game teaching your dog to boop your hand with his nose. This can be used to entertain or re-focus his attention.

Start with an open hand, trapping a treat under your thumb.

- Offer your hand to the dog saying "YES" when his nose touches your hand.

- After 5 reps with the treat under your thumb, go ahead and take the treat out but leave your hand the same way. When the dog bumps your hand, say “yes”, and give the reward from your pocket.
- Move your hand around so that he has to get up to follow it, eventually work it so your dog is following you while you walk backwards, bumping your hand. Mark this with “yes” and a treat.

Play with the timing so that you are saying “yes” just before he actually touches your hand. If you get mouthing your timing is too late, if you get pulling back, your timing is too early. It takes some practice to get this so be patient.

Anytime it falls apart, go back and put the treat under your thumb for a few reps and then repeat.

Teaching Your Dog to “Leave it”

Step 1 : Hold treats in your hand and wait for the dog to stop trying to get them. As soon as they back off, click and open your hand and give them one.

Step 2: Once your dog has mastered backing off from the treat, wait them out until they not only back off but also look up at you and click and reward. Hold the hand with food out to the side so you can easily tell if they are staring at the food or looking at you. At first it might not be direct eye contact but any glance away from the hand with the food is clickable at first. After several repetitions you can be a little pickier and wait for direct eye contact for a sustained amount of time.

Step 3: Once the dog is backing off and looking right at you readily, you are ready to add the label “leave it”. Present the food in your hand and say “leave it” just once and wait. When he backs off and looks at you, click and reward. Then take your hand away again and reset to do another rep. Build up to putting treats on the floor with your hand nearby to cover them up and start from the beginning.

Exam Room Preparation Games

Sit between my feet

Sit in a chair with your feet about hip width apart

Lure your dog under your legs from the side so that they end up sitting between your feet facing out

Make this a game by tossing the treat away for them to chase and take lots of breaks so it’s fun for them to go under and sit between your feet and then chase the tossed treat.

Gradually increase the time your dog sits between your feet and pet them
Gently start handling ears, chest, mouth, eyes, forelegs so that your dog is getting small pieces of a treat for allowing their body to be handled and held still
If they object and pull away, let them go . Release them with a tossed treat to chase and try again.
The idea is to teach the dog to love being handled and restrained so go slow and add more only when your dog is excited about it.
Keep sessions short 1-2 minutes at a time with play breaks to keep their interest high and form good associations.

Pick up and Feed

If you have a small dog or a puppy, practice picking them up and giving a treat while they are in your arms. This will help them associate being picked up with good things. If they wiggle, hold them tight so they feel secure, being sure the majority of their belly and chest is supported by your forearm. Offer the treat (something high value like cheese) and then lower them to the ground slowly and under control so they don't feel like they are falling. Start slow and build up to scooping them up randomly throughout the day so they associate it with good things.

Up on the Table

Put your dog up on a table for short sessions of handling so they get used to it. Be sure to cover the table top with a rubber backed rug so it's not slippery and they feel secure. You might start with an ottoman or coffee table at first so they don't have far to jump down and support them when it's time to get off the table so they are landing softly and NEVER on a slippery floor (use a non-slip rug or mat so they land securely). Use a lick mat or small treats to sweeten the experience and have them looking forward to it.

Hold Still

Practice restraining your dog as a game and toss cookies for them to chase when you release them. Add the table to this so that they are used to being restrained as a game and it's easier for them to accept it from a vet or groomer. If you do this on a regular basis, it will never be a big deal to hold still.

Handling Games

Feet, ears, mouth, tail, belly, head, eyes. Use high value treats and pair them with each touch so that they love to be handled. If you they pull away or panic, stop and move slower or take a break and play for a few minutes before trying again.

DeSensitize to Equipment

Pretend to listen to their heart, look in their ears with a flashlight, open their eyes, pick up their tail. If you have nail clippers, pick them up and feed while it's in your hand. Ear medicine bottle, eye drops, pick them up, feed a treat, put it down. The idea here is to teach them that the sight and smell of these objects means good things and reduce the emotional charge from panic to happy as much as possible.

Holding still for blood draw, injections and giving pills

Teach your dog to sit between your feet, facing out using a treat to lure them under your legs. Make it a game and toss the treat at first so they don't feel too confined and work up to having them sit between your feet. Feed small pieces of a treat while you go over their body, lifting each front leg as though you were holding it out for a blood draw, handle their eyes, face, neck. Stroke and feed and happy talk so they learn to love this time with you. Lastly, open their mouth and put a treat on their tongue. At first, they will pull back and may even spit out the treat, but as time goes by they will love having you open their mouth. This will prep them for giving pills and not having it be a big struggle.

Practice goes a long way here especially for our rescue friends. Some dogs will cooperate right away and let you get away with getting through the steps in a session or two, others will take a longer time to even get through the initial steps of each exercise. Go at your dog's pace and don't rush it. The goal isn't to just get it done, the goal is to get sustained and continued cooperation throughout your dog's life.

Happy Tails!!