

TRAINING SOLUTIONS

Nail Trim Nightmares



This Free Resource
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INTRODUCTION

Why do dogs freak out over nail trims?

On the surface, it doesn't seem rational to us that our dogs find nail trims to be so terrible, but with more careful consideration it makes complete sense.

Pain

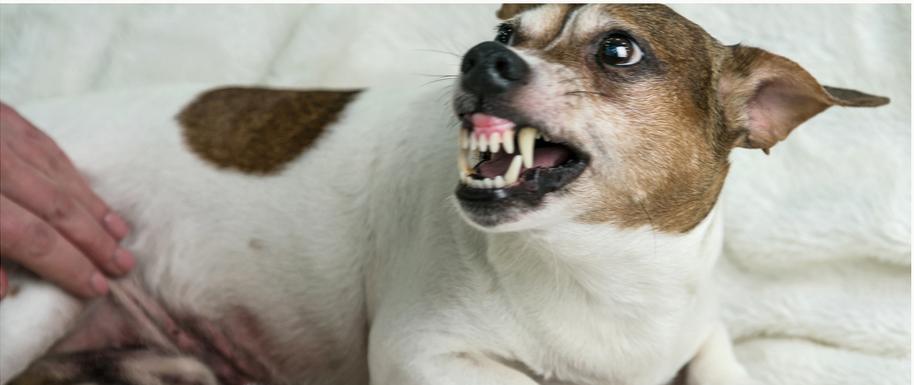
Many of us know the dread of accidentally cutting into our dog's quick, and unfortunately that pain is not something our dogs easily forget. Other considerations for pain include holding our dog's limbs at uncomfortable angles and potential musculoskeletal pain present in arthritic dogs and those with undiagnosed injuries/medical conditions.

Fear

Of course, a history of pain associated with the procedure is the most direct way to create a fear of nail trims in our dogs. However, some dogs are fearful of novel noises and may find the sharp *clip* or grinding sounds scary.

Loss of autonomy

This is a key factor that is almost never considered. When we restrain our dog's legs we remove our dog's ability to move. The ability to move freely is of vital importance to all animals, and it is natural for them to avoid situations where that ability is removed. In the case of nail trims, dogs will become increasingly panicked as the handler increases the level of restraint being used resulting in a snowball effect of escalating panic and restraint.



PART 1

Choosing the Right Tools

Having the right tools will not only make nail trimming more efficient, but it can also ensure your dog is as comfortable as possible for the procedure.

Have you had the same pair of clippers for the last ten years? Toss them! It's very important that your clippers are sharp and the mechanism operates smoothly. Dull clippers crush your dog's nail, making for a painful experience.

It is generally recommended to avoid the guillotine style clippers. Instead use the scissor style clippers shown below.



Of course, traditional nail clippers aren't your only option. A nail grinder may be a better choice if your dog has a long negative history with traditional nail clippers, finds the *clip* sound unpleasant, or if you are worried about cutting your dog's quick.

A nail grinder removes small amounts of nail at a time allowing you to easily check for signs that you are getting close to the quick without actually cutting into it. Be mindful to check for excessive heat on the grinding wheel, and never hold it to your dog's nail for more than 10 seconds at a time.



Additional tools recommended for nail trim procedures include high value food rewards (think real meats or smelly treats), a soft mat if trimming nails on an otherwise slick surface, a small flashlight to check for the presence of quick, and styptic powder to stop nail bleeding should you accidentally cut a quick.

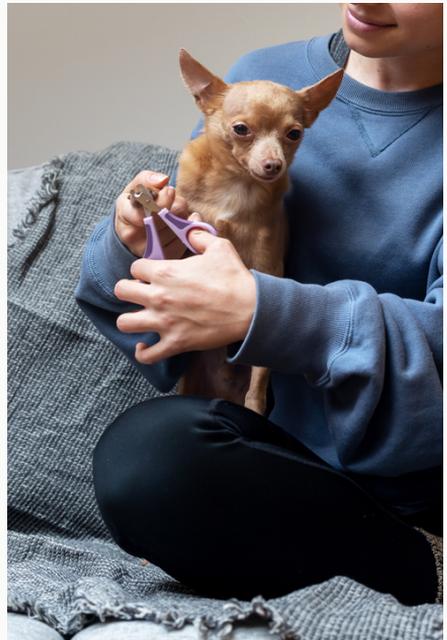
PART 2

Creating a Nail Trim Ritual

Dogs thrive on predictability, and when we're working with a procedure carrying a lot of emotional weight establishing a predictable ritual helps keep our dogs comfortable.

Plan to always do your nail trims in the same space and without any external distractions. Prep all of your tools in advance and have your high value food rewards within arm's reach.

Additionally, allow your dog to choose their preferred nail trim position. Small dogs may prefer to be seated in your lap, a large dog may prefer to stand, and some dogs may prefer lying down. I encourage owners to work *with* their dog's naturally preferred position, even if that means making adjustments to how you position yourself. Get creative, if your dog prefers to lie down, consider having them lie on the couch while you sit in the floor to get a clear view of their nails, if your dog prefers to stand, kneel on the ground next to them or sit on a short stool to get a clear view of their nails. Allowing your dog to choose their own position gives your dog the feeling of autonomy and helps to eliminate the possibility of you causing them discomfort by requiring them to be in a specific position.



PART 3

Small-Steps Training Plan

Exercise One: Sound acclimation

Practice pairing the sound of your tool with a high value food reward. With traditional nail clippers it is recommended to create a *mock* nail clip sound by clipping dried pasta! For each *clip* sound feed your dog one high value food reward. If using a nail grinder, turn it on and feed a high value food reward every 2-3 seconds as the grinder runs, and when the nail grinder is turned off discontinue feeding food. Repeat this exercise until your dog is neutral towards the sound, or better yet, is excited to hear the sound!



Exercise Two: Paw and nail handling

If your dog is sensitive to having their feet handled you will spend more time on this exercise. Don't forget to practice this exercise with all four feet!

Step one: Touch your dog's shoulder or hip and slide your hand down to their foot, pausing for just a moment on their foot, praise them, release their foot, and deliver a high value food reward. Repeat this until your dog is comfortable with this step.

Step two: Touch your dog's shoulder or hip and slide your hand down to their foot, lift their foot gently, praise them, release their foot, and deliver a high value food reward. Repeat this until your dog is comfortable with this step.

Step three: Touch your dog's shoulder or hip and slide your hand down to their foot, lift the foot, apply pressure to a nail, praise them, release their foot, and deliver a high value food reward. Repeat this until your dog is comfortable with this step.

While this exercise is presented in three steps you may need to break it down further depending on what elements of the exercise are challenging for them. For example, if applying pressure to the nail is causing them to pull away, you can break that step down further by simply touching the nail instead of applying pressure. Then, when they are comfortable with touch you can begin adding pressure.

PART 3 CONTINUED

Exercise Three: Tool introduction

Some dogs are totally comfortable with their feet being handled *unless* the tool is present. If your dog avoids you when the tool is out practice this exercise.

Step one: In view of your dog, go to where you keep the nail tool whether it be a drawer, closet, or a box.

Step two: Still in view of your dog, touch or open/close the drawer, closet, or box where you keep the nail tool, and immediately deliver a high value food reward.

Repeat these steps until your dog has no response to you interacting with where the nail tool is kept, or better yet, anticipates a food reward.

Step three: In view of your dog, get the nail tool out, place it on a nearby table, and immediately deliver a high value food reward. Repeat this step until your dog is comfortable with the nail tool being present.

Step four: In view of your dog, get the nail tool out and take it with you to your designated nail trim spot. Place the nail tool within arm's reach and in view of your dog.

Step five: Practice the paw and nail handling exercise using high value food rewards all while the nail tool lies in view of your dog.

Repeat these steps until your dog is comfortable with the presence of the nail tool during the paw and nail handling exercises.

**Exercise Four: Tool touch**

Using the handling techniques established in the paw and nail handling exercise begin incorporating touching your dog's nail briefly with the nail tool, praise them, remove the tool, and immediately deliver a food reward.

The full sequence will be: Touch your hand to your dog's shoulder or hip, slide your hand down to the foot, lift the foot gently, apply pressure to the nail, touch the nail tool to the nail, praise them, release the foot, and deliver a high value food reward.

Repeat this sequence with all four feet until they are comfortable with the exercise.

PART 3 CONTINUED

**Exercise Five: Trimming**

The moment of truth! Once your dog is comfortable with all of the previous exercises you are ready to practice light nail trimming. The goal with light trimming is to gradually acclimate your dog to the sensation of the nail tool at work without the risk of cutting the nail too short or overwhelming your dog.

The full sequence will be: Touch your hand to your dog's shoulder or hip, slide your hand down to the foot, lift the foot gently (be sure that you are positioned in a way that allows you to see the bottom of the nail), use the nail tool to remove a small amount of nail (just enough for the dog to feel the tool in action), praise them, release the foot, and deliver a high value food reward.

Once your dog is comfortable with light trimming or grinding begin fully clipping or grinding the nails for proper maintenance!

Not comfortable with your trimming or grinding skills? Talk to your groomer, vet, or visit YouTube for helpful tutorials.

**Know when to stop**

Earlier in this guide we mentioned the importance of your dog having autonomy during nail trims. Not only do we want to give the dog choice in how to position themselves during nail trims, but we also want to allow the dog to opt-in and out during nail trim exercises. This means if your dog pulls their paw away during a handling exercise, you release their foot, or if your dog decides to walk away during an exercise, you end the session. Ironically, you will find that the less you push the more cooperative your dog will be long-term!

PART 4

Building Momentum

In the exercises so far you have been maintaining a one for one rule. Meaning, you trim one nail, release the foot, and deliver one treat. While it is fine to maintain this rule for nail trim procedures long-term, you do have the option to work towards trimming multiple nails at a time before stopping to deliver a food reward.

I recommend working up to being able to trim one foot before stopping to deliver a food reward.

To do this you will begin by trimming one nail, release, and treat per usual. Then, on your next pass, trim two nails, release and treat. Finish that nail trim session following the new two for one rule.

At your next nail trim session begin by trimming two nails, release, and treat per usual. Then, on your next pass, trim three nails, release and treat. Finish that nail trim session following the new three for one rule.

At your next nail trim session begin by trimming three nails, release, and treat per usual. Then, on your next pass, trim four nails, release and treat. Finish that nail trim

session following the new four for one rule.

Once you have worked up to the four for one rule, you will be able to trim an entire foot (minus the dewclaws) before stopping to deliver a food reward!



PART 5

Troubleshooting

Things that sound so simple on paper can sometimes be challenging to implement!

If your dog is pulling away or opting out frequently

You may be moving too quickly for your dog! Do not be afraid to break each exercise down into smaller pieces that are more tolerable for your dog. Another possibility is the food reward you're offering your dog just isn't good enough pay for tolerating the exercises. Don't be afraid to really kick things up a notch with a very special treat!

If your dog has a history of growling, snapping, or biting

Safety for yourself and your dog is always top priority. I recommend muzzle training for all dogs that present a bite risk. Please visit, <https://muzzleupproject.com/> for muzzle training resources.

It feels like we are starting back at square one every time we practice

If your dog has a long history of nail trim aversion it is going to take quite some time to turn it around, patience will be key. There simply aren't any quick fixes for this issue. I do encourage owners to practice every day for at least five minutes, this allows you to build a routine and momentum, which translates to progress!

Are you still stuck?

There is no shame in bringing in a training professional to help, that's what we're here for! I have a lot of experience in helping owners develop a nail trim routine specific to their unique dog. Reach out to me directly at the email below or visit my site for an overview of all of my training programs.

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MEET THE TRAINER

Ashley Parker

ABC DT, CPDT-KA, Fear Free Certified

I have been working professionally in the dog care industry since 2013, getting my start in a daycare and boarding facility. I transitioned into full-time dog training in 2017 and launched Canis Major Dog Training in 2021.

I am a strong proponent for modern dog training methods, advocate for fear free practices, and in continual pursuit of additional education.

I am proud to have a team of like-minded professional dog trainers working with me at Canis Major, and we are privileged to bring high quality dog training services to so many amazing owners!



“Being kind and gentle to your dog does not make you “lesser than” and being concerned with your dog’s emotional well-being does not mean you’re a pushover. You can be kind and gentle while teaching behaviors, even at a high level and you can prioritize your dog’s emotional well-being while still maintaining boundaries.”

- Ashley Parker