



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Nail Trimming

Video reference

<https://youtu.be/rj0kXokkTy0>

Goal Behavior

Guide dog puppies should be relaxed and accepting of all grooming and handling. Many dogs do not enjoy having their nails trimmed, often because they were not introduced to the procedure positively as puppies. Our goal behavior is a puppy that calmly sits or lies still while its feet are being handled and its nails either clipped or ground with a Dremmel type tool.

Training Session Objectives

At each level we want to build a strong reinforcement history for accepting foot handling, introduction of grooming equipment and ultimately acceptance of nail trimming. The raiser should not progress to the next level until the puppy is very comfortable with the previous steps. This may take several sessions at each level with some puppies; other puppies may progress through the steps quickly. It is recommended that raisers practice handling the puppy's feet and either pretending to trim, or actually trimming nails, on a daily basis for the first few months in the raiser home.

Prerequisites

The puppy should know how to take food from the hand. Some experience with puppy handling techniques so that the puppy is comfortable being held and manipulated would be helpful but is not essential. It is important to start paw handling and nail trimming while the puppy is young – within the first few days of it arriving in the home. Puppy handling involves handling the feet so this is a good place to begin.

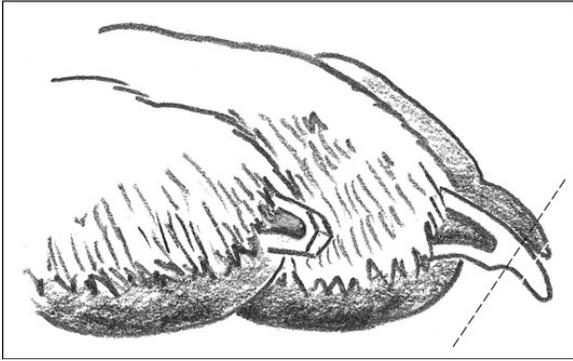
The puppy should be in a quieter, relaxed mood – not in need of exercise or relieving.

Session Set Up

Early sessions should take place in the home in a quiet room with no distractions. A second handler to help hold the pup, do the trimming or do the feeding of the reward is helpful but not essential. Having a table/crate/chair close by, to keep the food on, is useful at first. Having a food pouch on the person may be too much temptation for a baby puppy that has not been taught self-control around available food. To avoid “mugging” by the puppy, having the food on a higher level, only within reach of the handler, is helpful.

The type of tool used to trim the nails is up to the individual raiser. Some raisers are more comfortable with one type of clipper over another (e.g. guillotine type such as “Resco” brand or one of the scissors-type clippers). Several pet nail grinders are on the market but a regular small, rechargeable Dremmel is popular among dog professionals. Puppies should be accustomed to both clippers and grinders before entering formal training.

Raisers should have a styptic pencil, some cornstarch, or ice cubes available to stop bleeding should a nail be accidentally quicked. A bleeding nail is not serious but can be distressing to the raiser and can create a bit of a mess.



Long nail



Correctly trimmed nail

Trimming Technique

Raisers should be instructed in nail trimming by their leader. A demonstration one-on-one will help the raiser gain confidence in the procedure.

Most young puppies will have a hook on the end of the nail that needs to be trimmed off and makes for an easy visual as to where to trim. Obviously light colored nails show the quick well and the raiser can avoid that area more easily than with dark colored nails. Being conservative with dark nails will help avoid accidentally “quicking” the puppy. Trimming a little at a time several times per week will cause the quick to recede and the nail can then be trimmed shorter. See the photos of a long nail and correctly trimmed nails.

Use of a grinder lessens the chance of “quicking” the puppy. Raisers may also want to look at diagrams online showing exactly how and where to make the cut when trimming a dog’s nails.

NOTE: As in all R+ training, the “mark”, the word “Nice!”, is always followed by a food reward.

Nail Trimming Steps

The puppy should be held belly up on the raiser’s lap or between the raiser’s legs on the floor as in Puppy Handling exercises. (Eventually the pup’s nails may be trimmed while it is standing, sitting or on a table but for now it’s more comforting for the puppy to be held.) The raiser may scratch the pup’s tummy gently or rub its chest to get the pup to relax. Intermittent petting should be kept up throughout the foot handling to help keep the puppy calm. Speaking in a low, soothing voice will also help relax the puppy.

Step 1

The raiser should handle the puppy’s feet individually. Each foot should be held for several seconds and the raiser should “mark” the puppy with “Nice!” before letting go of the foot. Immediately after marking the raiser should reach for the food and place a piece in the puppy’s mouth. By quickly bringing the kibble to the puppy, the pup will learn not to reach toward the food but wait for the food to be placed right on its muzzle.

The raiser should gently take each toe and push the nail forward as though about to trim. While holding the toe, not after the toe is released, the raiser should mark. Immediately upon marking the raiser should reach for a kibble and place it in the puppy's mouth. If the puppy is accepting of the above the raiser may move on to the next steps. If the puppy is wiggly or pulling away from the toe handling, this procedure should be repeated for several days until the pup is relaxed and accepting.

Step 2

The nail should be pushed out as above, but now the raiser should grasp the nail between finger and thumb of the opposite hand, to simulate the clippers. While holding the nail with finger and thumb, the puppy should be marked. Immediately upon marking, the nail should be released and the puppy rewarded. It may be too much for the puppy to do all nails at once. Petting and massage in between will help keep the puppy calm.

Step 3

Now the raiser may introduce the tools. Initially the tools are turned off/not squeezed as though clipping. Letting the puppy smell the tool first is a good idea. The raiser should hold the puppy's paw and hold the tool of choice in the other hand. The tool should be gently touched to the puppy's paw, the puppy marked and fed. If the puppy is comfortable with the above, the raiser may push out individual nails, briefly touch the tool to the nail, mark and reward. Not all nails need be touched in one session.

Step 4

Now that the puppy is acquainted with the tool visually, an audible stimulus may be added. The raiser should hold the clippers away from the puppy, work them as though clipping, and while making the noise, mark the puppy. If a grinder is used, it should be turned on at arm's length at first and the puppy marked while it is running. Initially the grinder is more challenging to get the puppy used to because of the noise. It should be brought closer very gradually. Step 3, with no audible, should be repeated and several repetitions of steps 3 and 4 practiced so that the pup is made comfortable with both the touch and noise of the tools.

It may take several sessions for the puppy to be relaxed and comfortable with the previous steps. Some puppies may take a week or so of daily, positive interactions with the tools to be truly comfortable. Other puppies may go through all of the above steps in one session. The goal is to have a relaxed puppy that is ready for actual nail trimming. It is better to go slowly and positively rather than scare the puppy.

Step 5

The raiser should start by holding a nail with finger and thumb, as in step 2 above. Then the raiser should trim or grind the same nail, mark and reward. If the puppy is accepting, several nails may be trimmed but alternating between "pretending" to trim and actually trimming is a good way to keep the puppy's confidence. The puppy should be marked after each nail. A maximum of five nails should be trimmed the first session. As sessions are repeated, more nails can be trimmed. If the puppy is a little uncertain about the actual trimming, holding of the nail and pretending to trim should happen more than actually trimming. A high rate of reinforcement for several weeks will ensure the puppy has a good attitude toward nail trimming.

Step 6

The raiser may start random reinforcement i.e. not rewarding after each nail trimmed. It is advisable to vary how many nails are trimmed before marking and vary which nails are marked. If the raiser becomes too predictable in when they reward the puppy will learn to count!

Step 7

Older puppies, with several months of random reinforcement for acceptance of nail trimming, may be weaned to just one mark and reward as the last nail is trimmed. However, it is essential this experience be kept positive for the puppy and keeping up random rewards throughout the process is recommended.

Key Points

- All puppies progress at a different rate. Going slowly in the beginning will pay off later with nervous puppies.
- Having an assistant is valuable with nervous, wiggly or assertive puppies. An assistant can ensure that the puppy is receiving well-timed rewards or can be of help in doing the actual nail trimming while the handler focuses on holding and rewarding the puppy.
- Baby puppies that mouth when first introduced to these procedures should be re-directed. Usually if the puppy is moved slightly, or distracted by a chest scratch, the handler can accomplish a few

seconds of non-mouthy, appropriate behavior that can then be marked and rewarded. The more rewards the puppy receives for being compliant, the less likely it is to mouth in the future.

- Sometimes, putting a Gentle Leader on a puppy calms it down sufficiently to enable successful handling and rewards. (Puppies should be accustomed to the GL before putting it on the puppy for nail trimming and handling.)
- If the puppy is accidentally quicked and is made nervous of nail trimming, it may be necessary to back up a number of steps in the procedure until the puppy is comfortable and trusting again. This may take several weeks.
- If raisers are having trouble trimming their puppy's nails, they should consult with their leader at the earliest opportunity.