

A Touch and Treat Game

©Debbie Bauer 2015

Most dogs don't automatically like being reached for. Dogs communicate through their use of personal space. Some dogs want more space around them than others. When you reach into a dog's personal space, it may move away or seem stressed unless it has been taught otherwise.

Sometimes this teaching happens without us needing to put forth any special effort. The dog learns from consistent experience that people reaching for it always means good things are going to happen. All too often, however, dogs learn to distinguish between pleasant reaching and not-so-pleasant reaching based on the person's voice tone and body language. Dogs are very good at learning which of our signals lead to an experience that won't be very nice for them.

This doesn't mean the dog has been hit or corrected in some way (although it can mean that). If your particular dog doesn't like to be brushed, and you reach for his collar and then brush him, he will quickly learn that you reaching for him means he may be getting brushed and he will begin to avoid your reach. Or he may learn to avoid your reach only in certain rooms or situations, or at a certain time of day – depending upon where and when you try to brush him.

It's important to teach every dog to allow people to calmly reach for and hold his collar. Not only are there situations in our everyday lives when we use a hand on our dog's collar or body, but in an emergency situation, being able to get hold of your dog quickly and easily could save his life.

With a deaf or blind-deaf dog, you will not be able to rely on your voice to be reinforcing, encouraging, or praising. A deaf dog will only see you reaching and lunging toward it suddenly. It is important to keep your facial and body language as calm as possible when you do need to reach for your dog. Deaf dogs in particular are very observant to any visual cue. They will learn to react to even the slightest changes in your body language that indicate you are getting ready to reach for them. It's best to teach your dog to enjoy being reached for before habits of moving away develop.

These steps can be done with any dog (one that is deaf, blind/deaf, or hearing and seeing). Gently reach toward your dog and offer a treat with the other hand. It's not necessary to actually touch or take hold of the dog at this stage. This step will teach your dog that the motion of you reaching leads to a good thing. Only reach a few inches at first. The idea is not to create a situation where your dog wants to move away. The treat should come immediately after your arm reaches. If your dog is very wary of being reached for, you may need to just move your arm slightly and then toss the treat to him with your other hand so it lands close to him.

If you practice this often enough with high-value treats, your dog should start to approach you as it sees you reach. As your dog becomes comfortable with you reaching in its direction, begin to reach so that your hand comes closer and closer to your dog until you are actually touching him. Don't worry about grabbing or catching your dog at this point. Just focus on making the reach and the touch a good thing. Make it a game – reach and treat, touch and treat. Remember to keep your facial expression and

posture soft and relaxed. Keep breathing calmly and deeply, as this will have a calming effect on your dog as well.

When you and your dog are enjoying this game, start to vary how you reach. Sometimes reach faster and feed, sometimes touch a little bit firmer and feed, touch different parts of your dog's body and feed. Touch its neck and feed. Then touch its collar and feed. Gradually, progress to holding the collar, grabbing the collar more quickly, or holding the collar for longer periods of time before feeding. Mix it up every time you play the game.

Keep in mind that the idea here is not to "test" your dog and see if you can get a reaction from him. The idea is to move slowly through the steps so he feels comfortable with however you touch or reach for him. Going slowly and giving extra treats at each stage is much preferable to rushing and risking pushing your dog too far. Going slower gives you more chances to condition your reach and touch as a positive thing in your dog's mind. This is a game. You and your dog should both be enjoying the experience!

With a blind and deaf dog, you won't need to focus so much on the reaching because the dog won't see your hand coming. But it will be important to practice giving good treats each time you suddenly touch your dog. Some dogs will react to your hand being close to them, so start to feed for your hand just coming close to your dog. Progress gradually to touching your dog and immediately offer a treat right in front of his nose. Don't make him smell around for the treat. Feed the treat directly to your dog and feed it quickly so he associates the treat with the touch. With practice, your blind-deaf dog will start to look around at your touch expectantly, waiting for a treat instead of startling and trying to run away.

The teaching you are doing with this exercise may one day be your safety net. You may need to grab and get hold of your dog quickly. If you've done your homework and played the Touchy-Feely game, your dog will allow you to catch him easily and will look forward to whatever comes next. Continue to play this game throughout your dog's life. Move fast and slow and reach from various angles. Keep it fun and always use great treats!

***Debbie Bauer** is a certified Healing Touch for Animals® practitioner, a certified Tellington TTouch® practitioner, a published author, and a professional dog trainer. She has over 28 years of training and consulting experience working with dogs and their people. She specializes in working with dogs that display fearful, reactive and aggressive behaviors, in a positive manner. Debbie has trained dogs in a variety of fields including therapy and assistance dogs, print ad and media work, obedience, agility, and scent work. One of her passions is working with and educating about deaf, blind, and blind/deaf dogs.*