

Training Dogs to Love the Gentle Leader*

By Dr. Sophia Yin

OVERVIEW

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of **counterconditioning** with **desensitization**.

With **classical counterconditioning** we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with **desensitization**, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With **operant counterconditioning**, we train the pet to perform a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

Part 1: Training the dog to associate the head collar with good things.

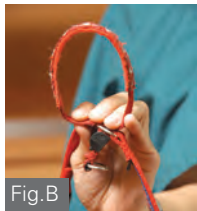


Fig.A, B, Step 1: Grasp the GL at the bottom of the nose loop in a manner that keeps it open.



Fig.C, Step 2: Hold treats in the other hand. Have enough treats to occupy the dog for at least 3 seconds. One option is to use many small treats or kibble. Hold on to each treat so that the dog has to chew or lick it for a second or 2 before he takes it and so that you can dispense the treat in a controlled manner. For the tiny liver biscotti pictured above, if used with a large dog you can hold them as pictured here instead of presenting them individually.

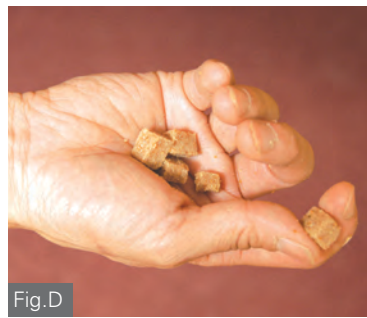


Fig.D, Step 2: By holding the treats in the manner shown here, you can immediately follow one treat with another by rolling treats from the palm of your hand to your thumb and index finger. These are Natural Balance semi-moist food rolls cut into bite-size treats.

*To see video depicting this protocol go to www.AskDrYin.com.

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Fig.E

Fig.E, Step 3a: Start by placing your entire hand through the GL while holding the treats.



Fig.F

Fig.F, Step 3b: Hold the GL and treats away from the dog so that he does not try to jump on or nose you to get the treats.



Fig.G

Fig.G, Step 3c: Then place the treats close to the dog's nose but far enough forward so that he has to reach to get them. He should immediately reach forward to eat them. It's important that he move forward to get them so that you can tell that it's his choice to come closer. If he looks wary of the GL, remove your hand and start again but this time with the GL farther up your arm.



Fig.H

Fig.H, Step 3d: Once he's finished the treat, immediately retract your hand and the GL so that he starts to understand that he loses the opportunity to receive treats when the GL is not close by. When the dog immediately takes treats in this manner 5 times in a row, continue to the next step.



Fig.I

Fig.I, Step 4a: Extend the treat a shorter distance through the GL.



Fig.J

Fig.J, Step 4b: Again, start by holding the treat and GL out of the dog's reach so that you control his access to the treats.

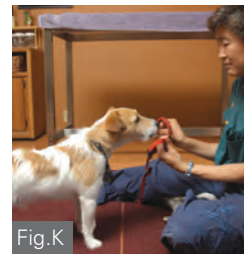


Fig.K

Fig.K, Step 4c: Then place both within reach and let the dog move forward to eat the treat. Do not try to push the GL onto the dog's nose; just hold it steady.

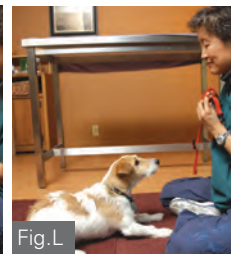


Fig.L

Fig.L, Step 4d: As the dog finishes the treats, move the GL out of reach so that you're in control of the situation. When the dog takes treats without hesitation 5 or more times in a row, move on to the next step.

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Fig.M

Fig.M, Step 5a: Now hold the treat right in the loop of the GL.



Fig.N

Fig.N, Step 5b: First hold the treats and GL away from the dog so that he must stand calmly.



Fig.O

Fig.O, Step 5c: Next, hold both out so that the dog leans forward through the GL loop to eat the treats.



Fig.P

Fig.P, Step 5d: Retract your hand and the GL as the dog is finishing the last treat, so that he doesn't have the chance to pull his head away. Never let him do that; always move the GL and treats away before that can happen so you don't train the dog to pull his head away.



Fig.Q

Fig.Q, Step 6a: Now hold the treat behind the loop so that the dog must stick his nose through it to get the food.



Fig.R

Fig.R, Step 6b: As before, begin by holding both the treat and the GL away from the dog.



Fig.S

Fig.S, Step 6c: Then extend both toward him so that the dog pushes his nose through the loop to get the treat.



Fig.T

Fig.T, Step 6d: Be sure to hold the GL steady so that the dog can push his nose through. You want the dog to learn to shove his nose through against the pressure of the loop.

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Fig.U

Fig.U, Step 7a: When the dog readily pushes his nose through several times in a row and looks completely comfortable doing so, snap the GL closed behind his ears. For dogs who have a history of hating the GL, you should keep repeating Step 6 until he's been putting his head in comfortably for at least several consecutive sessions. Or, for safety purposes, work on the operant counterconditioning steps in the next section prior to putting the GL on.



Fig.V

Fig.V, Step 7b: Give additional treats to keep him distracted and to continue building a positive association. Take off the GL before the dog is irritated or distracted by it.

Part 2: Training the dog that placing his head into the head collar earns rewards. (Switching from classical to operant counterconditioning.)

Perform these additional steps with dogs who already have an aversion to things being placed around their muzzle. These steps will ensure that they enjoy wearing the GL.



Fig.W

Fig.W, Step 1a: Once the dog is comfortable having you put on the GL with treats present, wean him off the treats by first switching to operant counterconditioning. As always, hold the GL away from the dog at first.



Fig.X

Fig.X, Step 1b: Then present the GL without treats. If the dog is ready for this step, he'll immediately stick his nose through the loop. This indicates his understanding of the association between the GL and treats.



Fig.Y

Fig.Y, Step 1c: Once he shoves his nose through, immediately reward him with treats. Then remove the GL and repeat.

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Fig.Z



Fig.AA

Fig.Z, AA, Step 2: Turn the training process into a game by running several steps away from the dog with the GL in your hand and then placing it within reach of the dog. The dog should rush after you to push his nose into the loop. When he does, reward him with treats. When he consistently runs after the GL and sticks his nose in, then you can put the GL on.

Part 3: Potential problems.



Fig.BB



Fig.CC



Fig.DD

Fig.BB, Example 1a, Incorrect: The dog has shoved his nose over the GL and pushed it aside to get the treat.

Fig.CC, Example 1b, Incorrect: This occurred because the treat was placed too far to the side.

Fig.DD, Example 1c, Correct: Be sure to place the treat in the center and hold the GL steady so that the dog can get his muzzle through the loop.



Fig.EE

Fig.EE, Example 2a, Incorrect: Instead of reaching for the treat, the dog is standing stationary. This indicates that we've attempted to progress too quickly. He does not want to stick his nose through. Go back to an earlier step and hold the treat flush with the loop or in front of it.



Fig.FF

Fig.FF, Example 2b, Correct: If you make the mistake of trying too much too soon, remove the GL and treats, and next time present the treats in such a way that the dog doesn't need to extend his nose through the loop as far. Additionally, you can walk away so that it's clear to the dog that he loses the opportunity to earn treats. You can even have a play session before starting the training session again to get him into a happy emotional state.

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