

Simple Behavior & Handling Tips for Shy or Fearful Dogs



**ASPCA Anti-Cruelty Behavior Team and the
ASPCA Behavioral Rehabilitation Center**

Contents



1. Drive-By Treats

When folks stop by, it's time for something tasty.



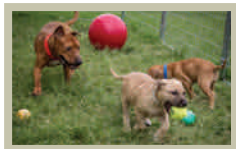
2. Quick & Dirty Handling

Cleaning time gets an added touch.



3. Hand Targeting

Hands aren't scary 'cause they mean treats.



4. Helper Dog Play Groups

If my friend likes people, maybe they're OK.

1. Drive-By Treats

Time Needed:

5 to 10 minutes

Purpose:

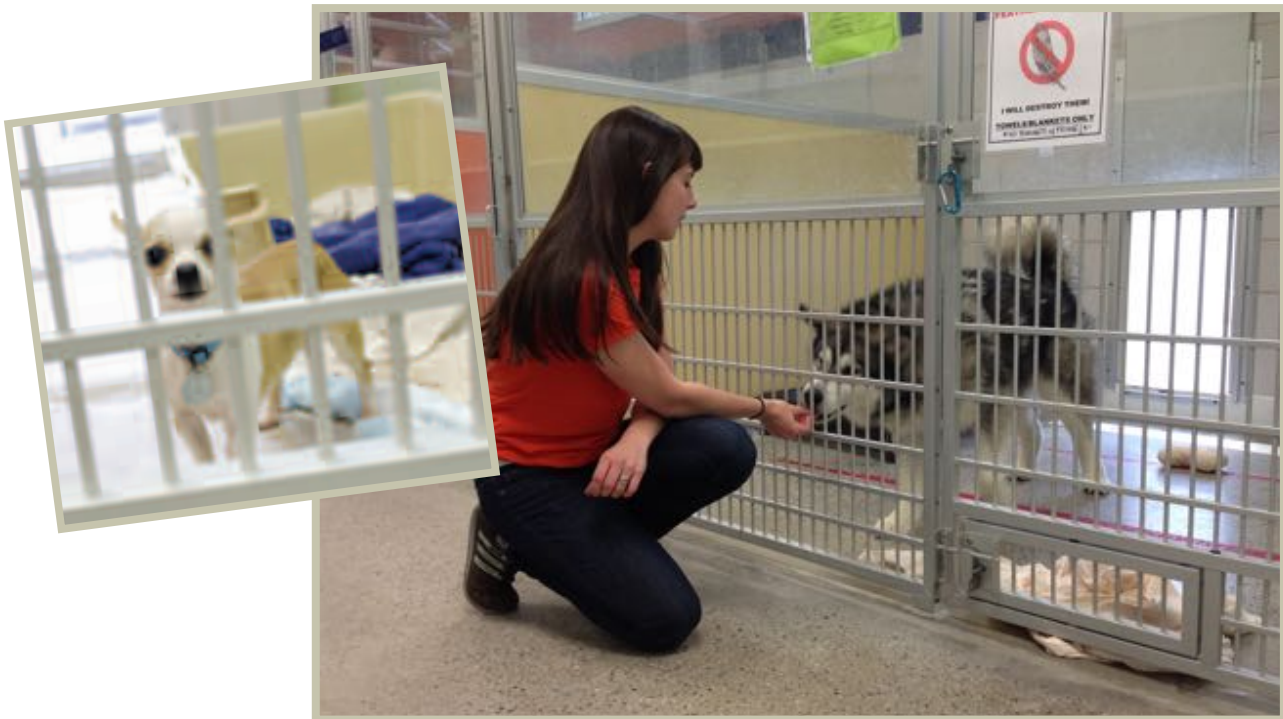
Teaches dogs to feel and look excited, not fearful, when people approach their crates or kennel runs.

What to Do:

1. Break a few treats into tiny, bite-sized pieces.
2. Treats in hand, walk through the kennel area.
3. Stop at the first crate/kennel run and say something to the dog in a quiet, friendly tone.
4. Offer the dog a treat. If she approaches to eat it within 5 seconds, feed by hand. If she doesn't, just drop the treat inside the crate/kennel run and move on to the next dog.

Bonus:

If you have extra time, open the dog's crate or kennel door before offering the treat.



2. Quick & Dirty Handling

Time Needed:

3 seconds

Purpose:

Teaches dogs to enjoy being picked up and/or handled.

What to Do:

1. Break a few treats into tiny, bite-sized pieces. Bring them with you, along with your other supplies, when it's cleaning time.
2. Open the dirty crate or run.
3. If the dog's small, pick him up and put him into the clean crate. If he's larger, leash him and move him to a holding area.
4. As soon as he's in his new spot, whip out a surprise treat and feed it to the dog. (If he doesn't take it, just drop it in front of him and proceed.)
5. Close the crate or kennel run door.
6. Clean and sanitize the dirty crate or run.



3. Hand Targeting

Time Needed:

15 minutes

Purpose:

To reduce fear of hands reaching, touching and picking up.

What to Do:

- 1. Extend your open palm toward dog as if you're offering a hand to sniff.**
Hold your hand low and keep it far away enough to avoid spooking the dog.
- 2. When the dog looks at your hand, say "Yes!"**
The word will mark the moment she looks at your hand and pinpoints exactly what she did to earn her treat.
- 3. Retract your hand and gently toss a treat to the dog with your other hand.**
Repeat until she looks at your hand as soon as you present it, several times in a row.



3. Hand Targeting *(continued)*

4. Wait for the dog to move toward your hand.

Even a small movement counts. The instant you see the movement, say “Yes!” Then toss a treat to the dog with your other hand. Repeat until she moves toward your hand as soon as you present your hand, several times in a row.

Helpful Hints:

- A. You can rub a bit of food on your hand to encourage investigation the first few times.
- B. If the dog won’t eat the tossed treats, try something tastier, or call it quits and wait until she’s hungry before you try this exercise again.
- C. If the dog’s too scared to move toward you at all, or if she retreats when you extend your hand, she’s not ready for this exercise. Just toss her treats until she seems more comfortable in your presence.

5. Now that the dog reliably moves toward your extended hand, wait for a nose touch.

The instant the dog touches your hand with her nose, say “Yes!” Then immediately toss a treat with your other hand. Repeat at least 15 times.

6. When the dog reliably touches your hand with her nose as soon as you extend it, hold your palm out a little further away.

Require the dog to take a step or two to touch your hand. Continue to say, “Yes!” the instant the touch happens, and toss a reward right after.

7. Require more and more steps over the next few training sessions.

8. Try holding your hand in different positions.

After the dog will take several steps toward your hand to touch it, try holding it to the right of her body, to the left, close to the ground and, finally, above her head. (Don’t try this last step until the dog’s completely comfortable with hand targeting and seems to enjoy the game. If she starts to look nervous when you reach over her head, go back a few steps for a while until she regains her confidence.)

9. Try the exercise with other people.

When the dog’s a hand-targeting pro with you, other handlers should try the exercise, starting at Step 4 or Step 5.

4. Helper Dog Play Groups

Time Needed:

15 to 30 minutes

Purpose:

To help dog-friendly fearful dogs feel more comfortable around people.

What to Do:

1. If needed, clean and sanitize the playpen floor. Place supplies in the pen for spot cleaning. Break some treats into bite-sized pieces and put them in your pocket. Grab a few toys and scatter them around the pen. Finally, ask another handler to assist you with the session.
2. Choose a confident, friendly dog (your “helper dog”) and a fearful dog. With the other handler, take the pair to the pen.
3. If the dogs haven’t met before, do a quick on-leash introduction.
4. Keep leashes loose during the greeting.



4. Helper Dog Play Groups *(continued)*

5. If the dogs don't get along, choose a different helper dog or switch to a different exercise instead.
6. If the dogs do seem to like each other, let the play begin! Ideally both handlers stay in the playpen to supervise the session. If the dogs are small, one handler can supervise alone.
7. Stay seated on the floor in the middle of the pen for the duration of the session.
8. Interact freely with the helper dog. Play with toys, pet her and feed her small treats.
9. Every once in a while, toss a treat to the fearful dog. Otherwise, ignore him completely. Playing "hard to get" is the most effective strategy when working with scared animals.
10. If the dog approaches, you can let him sniff you and feed him some treats, but don't look at him or try to touch him.
11. End the session after 10 to 25 minutes. Try your best to make collecting the fearful dog as stress-free as possible.

Helpful Hints:

- A. Over several sessions, you can start interacting with the fearful dog when he approaches you—but wait until you feel that he's really asking for your attention. (Watch for things like pawing, solicitous barking, repeated play bowing, relaxed body language and initiating physical contact by rubbing against you, playfully mouthing or climbing into your lap.)
- B. Go slow and back off immediately if he seems fearful. Never force contact. Try engaging the dog in play with a toy. If the dog looks tempted but too afraid to approach, toss it away from you at first.
- C. Eventually, you can work up to gently stroking him, as long as the touch doesn't make him retreat. If you're unsure about how he feels, stop touching him and see what he does. If he moves toward you or stays close, touch him again. If he moves away, offer treats or a toy instead.

More Resources

Enrichment and simple training should be a key component of daily care. Print and post these easy-to-follow [Manners and Skills](#) and [Puppy Training 101](#) charts so staff and volunteers know what to do every time they handle a dog or puppy.

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