



Grabitis

Why is it important?

Twenty percent of dog bites occur when a family member reaches to grab the dog by the scruff or collar. One doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out why. Obviously, the dog has learned that when people grab the collar bad things often happen. Consequently, the dog becomes hand-shy, plays Catch- Me-if-You-Can, or reacts defensively. It is potentially dangerous to have a dog dodge you when you reach for his collar. For example, you need to know you could effectively grab your dog if he ever tries to dash out the front door.

Teach your dog to love collar grabbing:

First, prevent your pup from forming negative associations to human hands, and second, teach your pup that being taken by the collar has only positive consequences.

1. If you let your puppy play without interruption, then take him by the collar to end the play session. Of course, he will come to dislike your reaching for his collar because a collar grab signals the end of the play session. Starting in the house and later in the park, frequently interrupt

puppy play sessions by taking your puppy by the collar, asking him to sit, praising him, offering a piece of kibble, and then letting him go play again. The puppy thus learns that being taken by the collar is not necessarily the end of the play session. Instead, a collar grab is a short timeout for refreshment and a few kind words from his owner before the puppy gets to play again. Also, every time you interrupt the play session, you may use resumption of play to reward your puppy for sitting and allowing you to take him by the collar.

2. If you lead or drag your puppy into confinement, he will no doubt come to dislike being taken by the collar, and he will dislike confinement. Instead, teach your puppy to enjoy confinement. Stuff a bunch of hollow chew toys with kibble, put them in your puppy's confinement area, then close the door with your puppy on the outside. In no time at all, your puppy will beg to go inside. Now simply instruct your pup, "Go to your bed (or crate)" or "Go to your playroom (long-term confinement area)," and open the door. Your pup will happily rush inside and settle down peacefully with his chew toys.

3. Above all, promise your puppy that you will never, never call your puppy and then grab him by the collar to reprimand or punish. Doing this just once will make him hate coming when called and hate when you reach for his collar. If you punish your puppy after he comes to you, he will take longer to come the next time. Eventually slow recalls will become no recalls. Your puppy will still misbehave; only now you will be unable to catch him! If you ever punish your puppy after taking his collar, he will soon become hand-shy, evasive, and defensive.

How to do it:

To prevent your puppy from becoming hand-shy, take hold of his collar and then offer a piece of kibble. Repeat this procedure many times throughout the day, and with each successive trial progressively increase the speed with which you reach for the collar. Your puppy will soon develop a strong positive association with being grabbed and may even look forward to it.

If your puppy is already even a tiny bit hand-shy, the last thing you want to do is reach for his collar. Instead, practice reaching for and handling areas he does not mind having touched or actually enjoys having touched. Then, gradually and progressively work toward the collar. Start by offering the dog a piece of kibble to let him know the game's afoot. "Not a bad start," thinks the dog. Then touch the tip of his tail and immediately offer another piece of kibble. If it is possible to touch the tip of the tail, then surely it is possible to touch just one inch down from the tip. Give the dog another piece of kibble and touch two inches down, then three inches down, and so on. On each repetition, touch the dog a little closer to his collar. It is only a matter of time before you can reach for and handle the dog's collar without upsetting the dog. When touching the dog's collar the first couple of times, offer one or two pieces of freeze-dried liver or something super delicious.

The key to progressive desensitization is to work slowly. If you even suspect the dog is a little intimidated or uneasy, go right back to square one—in this case, the tip of the tail—and this time work slower.