

# Overcoming Toenail Terror

By Cynthia McCollum

Our old dog, Casey (Traveling Salesman X Pet Store Cocker) was acquired from the SPCA at age 8 weeks. We lived in the city in a town house with no yard. All of Casey's exercise happened on leash on concrete. Doing toenails was never a problem. She wore them down walking. She was 2 when we moved to the suburbs and bought the dog a respectable fenced yard. She was in heaven, running and keeping the yard safe from marauding squirrels, birds and lizards.

About 2 months after we moved, it came time for Casey's annual vet visit. The vet tech took her history and her temperature, all normal. She picked up the nail clippers and Casey's foot and cut one nail. Casey bit her.

I was appalled. The tech, while not happy, said no problem, we'll wait for Doctor. Doctor picked up the clippers. The tech put Casey in a headlock. Casey proceeded to have a screaming, peeing, pooping, snapping fit. She bit the tech and the vet in the process. In the end it took 4 people, tranquilizers and a muzzle to get her nails done.

Years later now, I guess I should thank Casey for a career. Our subsequent visits to a canine behaviorist and Casey's progress landed me a new job apprenticing with the behaviorist and then onto my own business.

The problem with "toenail terror" is fear of dominant handling (handling the toes) and restraint (the headlock). Heavy discipline compounds the problem. Positive reinforcement conditioning and calm determination on the part of the owner can overcome most "toe terrorists" in a very short time. The program outlined here calls for twice daily 5 minute training sessions for 1 month, each step lasting one full week. **DO NOT RUSH ANY STEP!**

Casey was put on a basic obedience training refresher. She had taken a basic class as a youngster, but we wanted to condition her to respond instantly to commands. Teaching Sit, Down, Stay, Heel and Come help conditions the dog to listen to you even in other areas and under different circumstances.

**\*NOTE\*** If your dog is a serious biter you will need a basket muzzle. However, if your dog is a serious biter, you need the help of a professional trainer.



During normal snuggle sessions, handle each paw gently. If the dog pulls away that's fine, but go back to that foot until you are the one deciding to release the foot. This exercise is continued FOREVER. We also brushed her every day and wiped her feet every time she came back in the house, not just on muddy days.

1. Put the dog on leash and get some food treats. Use something special like cheese, liver or chicken cut into small pieces, not just a boring old dog biscuit. Sit on the floor with the dog and sit on the leash. Show the dog the treat. Pick up one foot. Let the dog nibble the treat while holding the foot for just 2 seconds. Before the dog finishes the treat, release the foot. Praise in a high, happy voice. Wow! What Good Toes! You are now a cheerleader for your dog. Avoid whiny, sympathetic voices. If the dog struggles, take the treat away and say NO in a calm firm low voice. There is no need to yell. Go back to holding the foot. Then, still holding the foot, give the dog a treat and praise highly as if there had been no struggle. Patience and minimal restraint are the keys to this step. Praise the smallest progress. Start with 2 seconds of foot holding and gradually increase the amount of time until the dog is accepting foot holding. If the dog begins to panic you are holding too long. Patience.

2. Get the nail clippers, the dog, the leash and the treats. Start by holding a foot, and then handle each toe with treats and high praise for compliance. Pick up the clipper and stroke it across the top of the dog's foot. Treats and high praise throughout this section of the exercise help condition out the fear of the object (the clipper).

3. Get the nail clippers, the dog, the leash and the treats. Repeat step 2, but stroke each toe and nail with the clippers. More high praise and treats.

4. Gather your dog and all your stuff. Repeat step 3, but at the end actually clip ONE nail. Be absolutely sure you do not hurt the dog (if you do, go back to step one). Before the dog has a chance to react, praise as if it just rescued your entire family from a burning building. Quit toe practice and go play ball. Play after training is a good stress release for both of you and is crucial. In this step it is important not to rush and try to do all the nails.



You can do another the next day and at all other sessions during the next couple weeks. You will need to practice regularly for a long time, gradually working your way up to trimming all the nails in the same session. Weekly nail trims of just a tiny bit are better than whacking blindly into a long nail.

Even when the dog will let you do the nails without a battle, remember: they don't have to like it. They only have to tolerate it. I've used this method on all my dogs since Casey and hundreds of clients. And while no dog likes toenail trims, they love the treats they get for tolerance!

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