



Family Companion One Nail Trimming Desensitization

We recently received an email asking us for help with a very common problem:

I have a 5 year old pitbull bullmastiff mix, biggest baby you ever met wouldn't hurt a fly, but I only have one problem: She will snap and growl at anyone who tries to cut her nails and her nails are so long i don't know what to do. If anyone has any advice or knows about something that will sedate her to do this please let me know. Thank you very much, and a muzzle doesn't work we tried. Thank you

Nail phobia is sometimes hard to fix, but if you have patience, you can work on it really slowly. In the meantime, I would have the nails done by your vet so that you are not associated with anything "bad" in relation to her nails. Vets can sedate the dog temporarily so that you can get the nails trimmed and the dog doesn't even know that it happened.

Once that is done, you can then start to desensitize her to the nail trimmers and to you handling the nails. It has to be done very slowly and on her terms. There is no rushing the steps. We are looking for an emotional change to happen in relation to you handling her feet and trimming her nails. We want it to become the highlight of her day! If you see any aggression, you need to back up and keep working at the previous level until she is ready to proceed. So often we just want to get the job done and then we sabotage all of our earlier work!

First just have the trimmers out in the environment. We had one client that just put them on the floor next to the door so that the dog had to walk past them. You could also put them on the floor near her food bowl. Then you are going to carry them around, but not go anywhere near her feet, just make them part of her environment. You can move to the next step when she doesn't care that you have them.

Separately, you need to handle her feet and nails and give lots of treats for letting you do that. Treats only come for handling the feet, and make it good treats, something that she only sees when you are working on her feet. Steak, liverwurst, whatever floats her boat!

Then you bring the two events together and handle her feet with the trimmers nearby. Then you handle her feet while holding the trimmers. Then you actually handle the nails with the trimmer in your hands. All of this is done with lots of treats. If she won't take them or shows any aggression, then she is too overwhelmed, and you need to back up.

Once she is okay with that, then you can flick her nails with your fingers, so you are simulating the pinch that happens with the trimmers. Flick and treat, flick and treat repeatedly. Then fake like you are going to trim. All of this needs to happen while she is calm and taking treats. Finally one day you can just trim a tip off, and then give lots of treats. Then you do two, etc, etc. I have one dog that I still trim one nail, and then give him a piece of cheese, trim another and give another piece of cheese. Some I treat after I finish the whole paw. Some of my dogs don't need treats. I let them dictate the rules when it comes to nail trimming.

Warning--in hard wired nail phobic dogs this could take years! Only proceed to the next step if you are not getting any kind of aggression. If you feel better with her wearing a muzzle during this, you need to desensitize her to the muzzle in much the same way (let us know if we need to walk you through those steps too).