

My Dog Loves to Have His Teeth Brushed!

Just like little children do not like to have their teeth brushed when you begin brushing their teeth for the first time, dogs and cats will object without fail the first time they feel the brush and taste the paste as well. Teaching your pet to accept a toothbrush is a trained behavior involving a series of small steps over a period of time.

Applying the classic training technique of positive reinforcement to learn this new behavior is very important in this situation. When an animal learns a behavior in order to acquire something it desires, the process is called positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcers are anything that, when paired with a behavior, tend to increase the likelihood that the behavior will be repeated. Common reinforcers used with pets are food and/or playtime. Our desired behavior is allowing the teeth to be brushed.

To start, determine what you are going to use as a reinforcer / motivator. This is actually determined by your pet. Figure out what they really want. Is it a food kibble, special treat, play time with a special toy, etc. The reinforcer should be given every time they complete the behavior successfully, and only if they complete the behavior successfully.

The process takes the owner and pet through a series of training levels with each level training a behavior that is needed to move to the next. Each of the levels begins with individual training sessions that are very mild and quick (mild pressure for 2 seconds), progressing slowly over a number of days until the pet is comfortable doing the behavior (firm pressure for 20 seconds). The pet should never be forced, but must do the behavior successfully and without a struggle to receive their reinforcer /reward. The reinforcer should always be given immediately upon completion of the behavior. Training sessions should be just a few times each day. Total training period may be 2-3 weeks or as long as 6 weeks. In general, the slower the progress, the more patient we are, the most successful and permanent the training.

Level One: Rubbing the outside of the mouth. Start this level with a light touch for just a few seconds, increasing pressure and length of contact gradually. Reward immediately after sitting quietly for desired behavior.

Level Two: Rubbing a soft object (finger or Q-tip) with an attractive flavor (peanut butter/garlic powder/tuna juice) on the gums of the mouth. Start the first session soft and short. Give the reward immediately when successful.

Level Three: Rubbing a soft bristled toothbrush or rubber finger brush with peanut butter/garlic powder/tuna juice on the gums and teeth. Here we use a familiar flavor, but introduce a new feeling. Increase pressure and time over several days

Level Four: Rubbing the toothbrush with beef or poultry flavored pet toothpaste on the gums and teeth. Continue the reinforcer for a few weeks after you

are able to brush the teeth successfully with little resistance, and then taper the amount of times the reinforcer is given until the brushing itself actually becomes the reward.

Proper pet dental care at home will greatly improve your pet's quality of life throughout its lifetime, and will significantly reduce your pet healthcare costs as well.