



## **Paw Handling – Desensitization / Counter- Conditioning**

by

*Laura Garber, CPDT-KA, CC, FFCEP, CBC*

The process of desensitization and counter-conditioning is a powerful 1-2 punch that helps treat a dog's fear or discomfort about a particular stimulus. Desensitizing entails presenting the stimulus in very low levels so as not to trigger the usual, fearful response. This is called "below threshold". Counter-conditioning means to change the dog's feelings about that stimulus from fear or anxiety to one of anticipation and pleasure. In the case of handling sensitivity, such as paw sensitivity, start by handling in a part of Fido's body that does not upset him, such as his shoulder. With each touch of that body part, feed Fido a little scrumptious treat. If being touched on the shoulder means a little piece of chicken, then you can see that Fido will begin to enjoy being touched on the shoulder because it has come to anticipate pleasurable things. If you have to start by touching and feeding simultaneously, your goal is to make the touch slightly *ahead* of the treat presentation. Gradually move down Fido's leg, getting closer and closer to his paws. If at any point he looks uncomfortable or concerned, then step back a little bit. He's not ready yet.

What better way to make handling of paws a fun thing than by training it as a trick and putting it on cue:

**"SHAKE"**: With Fido in a sit, have a treat in your hand just in front of his nose, either in your closed fist or pinched in your fingers, so that Fido can't get to it. The hope is that, in his frustration, he will bat at the treat hand. If this happens, mark it with a happy "yes!", grab the paw with the other hand, and open the treat hand to reveal the treat. If the frustration method isn't working, try holding the pinched treat above Fido's head and off to one side. By rocking him to the side, often he will pick up the opposite paw to reach. Mark it with a happy "yes!", grab the paw with your other hand, and open the treat hand to reveal the treat. After he is consistently offering a paw, start putting the verbal command "shake" or "give paw" in front of it.