

Canine Gentling – Building Trust and Leadership The Puppy (or kitten, adult dog or cat)



"His name is Fluffy? I thought his name was 'STOP IT!'"

Unless you teach your puppy good manners, the same puppy who gives so much pleasure at first can develop bad habits that cause some people to have their pet destroyed. **Gentling** is a collection of handling techniques to help you intentionally develop the personality that will make your puppy a delight for life. For best results, the pup should begin these steps at 6–16 weeks old, or a kitten at 3–7 weeks old. For older pets, just go much more slowly and gently.

The reasons to do the Gentling Exercise are:

1. It establishes that you are bigger and stronger than the pup, but still gentle and non-threatening.
2. Once you are trusted as pack leader, the pup will bond and want to follow you and your instructions.
3. Demonstrating gentle leadership significantly reduces inappropriate aggressive behavior later.
4. During Gentling, nothing bad happens so the pup develops trust in you.
5. The puppy becomes accustomed to routine examination and handling by anyone.

The pup will (and should!) experience only a small amount of stress. When mild stress is experienced, but nothing bad happens, it builds puppy self confidence which contributes to a friendly confident personality. If the dog becomes stiff or threatens aggression during any of these exercises, stop and consult a behaviorist.

Before you can teach your puppy anything, you must communicate that you have the right (status) to teach. This means showing the puppy that you and all humans in your house are trustworthy leaders to the pup. The Gentling Exercise has five components: Suspension, Hug-Squeeze, Massage, Range of Motion and Restraint.

Suspension means to suspend the pet for 4–5 seconds (until the pet looks away) holding the upper body and letting the bottom half swing free. This has a “Maternal Message” by invoking the “Immobilization Reflex” used when mom carries the infant by the scruff, suspending it while moving to a safer nest.

Hug the pet so it cannot move, and hold the hug for at least a slow count of 10. If the pet struggles, then **squeeze** and overpower the struggling immediately, then as soon as the pet “gives up” for a count of 3, release the pet, praise, pet and give a treat. Then repeat. The goal is a cooperative pet.

Massage is different from “petting” or “grooming”. During massage, you move the skin over underlying body as far as it will go. Do it gently with a loving touch. Move it back and forth and in a circular motion. Do this body massage over every square inch of the dog. This is how the dog becomes accustomed to having people touch its ears, paws, belly, tail, etc. The most common mistake is to only massage the back. Probably the two most important areas to massage are the back of the neck, and the muzzle. The back of the neck is a natural “power spot” since that is where the mother dog grabs the pup to carry it resulting in a “passivity reflex”. Massaging the muzzle is important to prepare the dog for teeth brushing, and since control of the muzzle is another “power spot” and we want the puppy to learn that humans control all forms of power.

Range of Motion means gently moving the puppy’s extremities. Once you can massage your puppy without him struggling, begin to move his head and limbs in every comfortable position. This uses your hands to teach the pup that you are the leader and trustworthy. Be sure that there is no discomfort while you are doing this exercise.

Positive Restraint means gently holding the puppy still against its will as a positive interaction. (e.g. a hug!) Start this the day you get your new puppy, and do it daily until the pup has such trust that he or she acts like a rag doll. If the pup seems fearful, proceed in small steps. If the pup seems to panic, put the pup down and walk away. Otherwise, comforting might be mistaken for praising the panic. Later, start again and go more slowly. In each case, allow no more than a small amount of fear, then hold still until he or she relaxes. This is very age dependent. An 8 week old puppy will usually accept this immediately, but the same pup at 12 weeks might resist, and at 16 weeks it becomes VERY difficult. Therefore, do these gentling exercises at least weekly during the first year of the dog’s life.

Watch The Dog’s Body Language For These Signs...	
You can see fear & anxiety when:	You can see the pup relax when:
1) Muscle tone increases, or mild struggling	The muscles relax
2) The puppy begins mouthing of your hands	The mouthing turns to gentle licking
3) The pupil size and white of the eye increases	The wild look in the eye goes away
4) Thrashing, urinating, crying or obvious panic occurs	The pup make take a deep breath

When any mild signs of fear or anxiety appear, (1 or 2 above) act and talk relaxed, and hold it right there. Offer a food treat as distraction. See if the puppy relaxes after several seconds or will nibble on a food treat. Try to get the pet to relax before releasing. Then gradually return to the level of handling that previously caused the first sign of stress. You are literally “expanding the pet’s comfort zone”. Using the food treat does not reward the stress, it causes a distraction.

If level 4 (thrashing) is reached, you have overdone the handling for this dog. Stop, try for a relaxed “make up” and then go much more slowly and gently after several minutes of time out. Note that if the dog does become stressed to this degree, it means this dog is at high risk of developing serious behavior problems in the future, and it is important that we return to these exercises with a more gentle touch. The purpose of these exercises is to develop trust in the handler. Vigorous handling that causes severe stress actually decreases trust.

When beginning these techniques, it is common to cause mild stress such as levels 1 and 2. This means the pet is unsure of your intentions, and a little nervous. Just go slowly, and it is Ok to allow some nibbling of a food treat hidden in your fingers while you do the Gentling.

When relaxation signs appear, let your puppy go and praise the relaxation. By doing the manipulation, then releasing after the puppy relaxes, you have just decreased that puppy’s fear, built its confidence and increased its trust in you as its leader. You want your puppy to learn that the way to get freedom is to “give up and follow”. Massage, move and restrain him in many

different positions until he relaxes. The goal is a dog that trusts you so much they act like a limp rag doll, and you can do anything with them.

When the puppy is relaxed with your handling, begin your routine monthly health examination. Even if you don't know what to look for, just begin to look at every inch of the pup to learn normal for this dog. Look at the teeth, ears, paws, nails, belly (and all over for fleas), and around the tail area for tapeworm segments.

Gentling establishes you as a pleasant trustworthy leader without pain, punishment or yelling. This not only gentles the puppy during adulthood, but also bonds the pup to you stronger than anything else you can do, so you can enjoy a long and happy life with a gentle dog. In older dogs or cats, the same principles apply; just go much slower, with more food rewards for smaller increments of cooperation.