

## The Chronicles of Oliver—Part I—Grooming

Last week I introduced you to Oliver, the poodle with a long list of behavior issues who joined my household last year. From separation anxiety to grooming aggression, Oliver had it all. I knew I couldn't work on all the behavior problems at once, so I had to pick the order in which I would concentrate my efforts. Housebreaking was high on my list, raking and biting my rear end when I came in the house was definitely something I wanted to stop, but believe it or not those were only the minor problems. The big problem was grooming. Oliver couldn't be groomed without being knocked out. I don't mean mildly sedated—he fought any drug given to him. The vet had to completely put him under and then shave him down as no groomer could safely clip Oliver's fur. As far as I was concerned, this was unacceptable and the number one behavior to be modified.

Dogs fear grooming for a couple of reasons. One, the dog lacks experience with the whole process, or two the dog has had a bad experience with grooming. In Oliver's case, it was a combination of both. He came into the rescue a matted mess and looked as if he had never been groomed. He had so many hot spots under the mats, I'm sure his first experience with grooming couldn't have felt good. *A word of caution: If a dog is highly aggressive, I don't recommend attempting the following steps without consulting with a professional.*

I first needed to get Oliver used to being touched all over his body. While he slept on the couch next to me or on my lap, I did just a few light touches from his head down to the base of his tail, then from his shoulders and rear flanks down his legs to his feet. I watched closely for any reactions to sensitive spots, so I knew where to work carefully. Our first few sessions consisted of just that—light touches down his body. Then I started pinching small tufts of hair between my fingers near the base of the fur and turning (not twisting) them in small clockwise circles (you can also just do light small circles with your fingers without the tufts of hair). Try this on your own head for practice. It feels rather nice. I followed the same pattern on his body as the light touches. The idea of touches is to release pain and fear at a cellular level. It helps connect the neurons in the whole body. (To learn more about positive touches for your dog, I highly recommend reading *Getting in TTouch With Your Dog* by Linda Tellington.)

Oliver began to accept touches in the area where his hot spots once had been and on his feet. My next step was to help him learn to accept the presence of scissors and clippers. I began to set the scissors next to him while he ate, while I did TTouch, while we played games—basically anything positive we did, the scissors magically appeared. Now the scissors were no longer something to fear, they meant that good things were about to happen. When Oliver began to relax around the scissors, I started picking them up, putting them in my hand, and opening and closing them like I was cutting the air so he could hear the sound. Lots of treats came his way while I did this. Then it was time to try to put the scissors to his fur. Starting on an area where I know he had little sensitivity, I did some touches on his body, and then picked up the scissors, cut just a few tufts of hair, and put the scissors down. Lots of treats for Oliver. The next day I repeated the process.

Yes, this takes a long time with some dogs and patience and acceptance is the key. So what if my poodle had the most bizarre haircut for the next few weeks; beauty was not the point. The idea was to show him that scissors do not equal pain. By the next month, I could successfully clip Oliver all over with the scissors. This was huge, but my task was not over. There were still the nail and hair clippers to overcome. The nail clippers were used just to tap each toe at first, and then slowly I worked up to clipping just one nail a session. The hair clippers were turned on while I prepared dog food in the morning, when we were watching T.V., playing games, singing songs—the clippers became a normal background noise in the household. Since nothing bad happened when the noise was going on, there was nothing negative to associate with it. Gradually I clipped Oliver in areas where he didn't mind the initial touching and worked up to other more sensitive areas of his body. Again, this was a gradual process always ending on a positive note. We tend to push our dogs too far when they are making progress. Always make sure to end your training sessions before the dog reaches a breaking point. If you have a dog who is going to need a lot of grooming, start touching and grooming your dog at a young age even if you are not the one who is going to do the grooming. Your groomer will thank you!