

# Training Dogs and Cats to Love Having Their Teeth Brushed

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## OVERVIEW

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of **counterconditioning** with **desensitization**.

With **classical counterconditioning** we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with **desensitization**, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With **operant counterconditioning**, we train the pet to perform a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

The steps shown below can be used with both dogs and cats.



Fig.A

**Fig.A, Step 1a:** Place something tasty, such as canned pet food, Kong Stuff'N liver or peanut butter paste (The Kong Company, Golden, Colorado) onto a pet toothbrush.



Fig.B

**Fig.B, Step 1b:** Or use a tasty pet toothpaste. The toothpaste should be formulated just for pets. It has enzymes that degrade the bacteria on the teeth and is safe for pets to swallow. Regular toothpaste for humans is not meant to be swallowed and could cause an upset stomach.



Fig.C

**Fig.C, Step 2:** Hold the toothpaste-smeared toothbrush to the dog and cat's mouth to let him lick off the treat. If he likes it, repeat this step several times. Then move on to brushing his teeth.



Fig.D

**Fig.D, Step 3:** With the treat or toothpaste on the brush, insert the brush just inside his lips so that you can brush the outside of his teeth. Be careful not to insert your finger between his upper and lower tooth and accidentally get bitten. If done correctly, dogs and cats should look forward to their daily brushings.

**This page is excerpted from, *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats*, by Dr. Sophia Yin. ([www.nerdbook.com](http://www.nerdbook.com))**

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