

Bathing a Dog Who Hates Baths

How to introduce a dog to regular bathing and grooming gradually.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have a 6-month-old Cocker Spaniel named Roxy and the problem lies with me trying to bathe her. She is not afraid of the water as we take her to the beach and she loves swimming, and splashes herself with water at home all the time. But the minute I start running the bath water she starts crying, and when I put her in, she starts crying so badly that my neighbors think I am hurting her. My bathroom ends up under water and she is traumatized and not properly rinsed. I've tried everything from treats to dog grooming salons, but she sometimes gets so bad that she starts vomiting. Please give me advice on how to help her overcome this problem.

A. I can see why you would be discouraged. Roxy hates the bath so much that she works herself into a frenzy and it's as tough on her as it is on you. This phobia is something she needs to overcome as all dogs, especially long-coated breeds like the Cocker Spaniel, need a bath occasionally or they will develop skin problems and have an unpleasant odor.

Since she likes swimming and playing in puddles, I would suggest you fill the tub or sink to a safe level way ahead of time – just a few inches – with warm, not hot, water and place her in it, using a pail or pitcher to wet her down and then adding shampoo. Have three-gallon milk jugs ready for the rinse, pre-filled with warm water, so you won't have to turn on the dreaded faucet. Do not attempt this unless you are feeling calm and unhurried yourself, and don't worry about the neighbors! It may help if your puppy is pooped from a long walk or play period. Talk gently and lovingly as you work. You may need to get creative about washing her face, using a soaking wet towel or face cloth and skipping the soap.

This will work for starters, but eventually she will need to tolerate a regular bath. In extreme cases, the dog may require a sedative from your vet or an herbal product like Rescue Remedy about an hour before you begin. Using a portable shampoo attachment or a hand-held massage shower head that will not make such a hissing noise as a regular hose does, gently feed the water into her coat rather than spraying. Begin lathering her from the rear end on up, praising her all the while. Rinse in the same fashion, bundling her up in a fluffy towel and patting her dry, then rewarding her with a tasty treat.

I suspect this is a puppy behavior problem. Roxy is like some little tots who cry and carry on because they don't want to get their hair brushed or faces washed. Both of you would benefit greatly from dog obedience classes, starting with puppy kindergarten, to establish your leadership and build the puppy's confidence so she won't be so scared. You will also learn how to teach her basic commands like Sit, Come, Lie down, Stay, and Heel, making your life easier and hers much safer. In Roxy's case, you may also need some one-on-one problem-solving sessions with a trainer to help you and your pet overcome this.