

Grooming an Aggressive Shelter Dog

An abused dog growls and snarls at the groomer, forcing his owners to try grooming him at home.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. We recently adopted from the local animal shelter who was so abused that he had a severely broken leg which was amputated before they would let us formally adopt him. Mickey appears to be a Miniature Schnauzer-Pomeranian mix. He looks like a Schnauzer, but has the coat of a Pom. We have our other two dogs professionally groomed monthly with no problems. Mickey, however, gives them a very hard time – growling and snarling. They have used a muzzle on him, and they give him frequent breaks, but he just hates it. He is not aggressive at any other time other than when he's at the groomer's.

We spoke to our vet and he gave us medication that takes two weeks to build up in his system in order to alleviate the aggression. So far he's been on the medication for about a week and a half, and we are not seeing any obvious changes. Now, we are thinking of grooming him ourselves. Can you give us any advice?

A. If his new medication from the vet does not kick in, something tells me that the only way you will be able to get Mickey professionally groomed is if he is under anesthesia, in other words, asleep throughout the procedure. Since he is an abused dog, we have no way of knowing what made him so fearful of being groomed, but as it stands right now, he poses a serious danger to the groomers who try to work on him. Working himself into a frenzy on every trip to the groomer can be harmful to him, too.

During my long grooming career, I have dealt with only a handful of dogs like him and I know that there are instances when it's not worth the struggle for either the professional or the pet. If you locate a vet who also employs a groomer, you could have him groomed there under sedation, but of course it would be easier on Mickey – and your wallet – if you could do the job yourself.

In either instance, grooming your dog will mean either brushing and bathing him or clipping him down short. If he looks more like a Pomeranian, he probably has a lot of downy undercoat that can get packed into a pelt if not brushed regularly to remove shed hair. Unfortunately, an expertly scissored haircut for him will probably be impossible. If he is groomed under sedation, he will be lying on the table and if you do the job at home, you'll want to complete as quickly as possible to make it more tolerable for him.

If you are brushing and bathing him without a haircut, it would be best to blow his coat dry after the bath. He needs to be totally mat-free before you put him in the tub. If you prefer to clip him down, get yourself the same electric clippers used by professional groomers and a few blades – a #10, a #7f and #5f. A grooming table with a non-skid surface, a post, and grooming noose make your job easier. On the floor, Mickey can squirm out of your grasp, but on the table, he won't be the boss. Since you have built up a level of trust with this little fellow, he may accept your attempts to groom him more readily.

Put him up on the table for practice sessions before you introduce the brush or clipper. Praise him lovingly, massage him all over, and reward him with treats when he cooperates. Because he has only three legs, you will probably need an assistant to help him stand. After a week or so, introduce the brush or clipper and remember, you don't have to do the entire job in one sitting. If he snaps or growls, hold his muzzle, make eye contact and say "No!" like you are a Marine Corps drill instructor. If he can bully you, you will not succeed in grooming him, but if you can do the job, over time, grooming him will strengthen the bond you already share.