

Bichon Frise Grooming Phobia

Bichon Frise hates being groomed.

By Kathy Salzberg

Q: I have a 1½-year-old Bichon Frise. I got him when he was six weeks old, and I began brushing him as I talked to him and tried to make a fun bonding kind of thing out of it. He hated it! From Day One it has been a huge problem. And with a Bichon, it's a big problem to not keep him groomed.

I was persistent, but it did not improve. When his hair got to the "not so soft" stage and needed cutting and professional grooming, I began taking him to a groomer every 4 to 5 weeks.

The groomer said he was awful to work on. But she was able to cut his hair down very close. I figured with his hair so short I could start over and try to get him to let me brush him between grooming sessions.

On the first day he wiggled, nipped, growled and barked. I couldn't even continue. Also, since last week's grooming fiasco he has had a definite personality change. He won't leave the living room -- not even to eat. He won't go out his dog door or walk outside unless we're right beside him. My husband thinks he's embarrassed about how he looks. Is that possible?

Do you have any suggestions how to correct these behavior problems?

A. You're right. The Bichon Frise is one breed that is high-maintenance in terms of grooming. This adorable fluffball has a curly non-shedding coat and ideally, it should be brushed daily to keep it from becoming a walking mat from head to tail. At my salon, we see most Bichons every four to six weeks.

Bichons can be highly sensitive. They crave attention and truly suffer when left alone, sometimes resulting in destructive or neurotic behavior. They need lots of socialization as pups to keep them from becoming overly shy and to build their confidence. They are slow to mature -- some act like puppies all their lives.

I don't doubt that your little dog is scared silly of the groomer and really dislikes your attempts to groom him at home, but just like a small child who doesn't like his face washed and his hair combed, he needs to learn to accept grooming as a necessary part of life. His reaction after being shaved down is not surprising either. Being a sensitive and nervous little dog, he was probably traumatized by the whole experience and some dogs do get embarrassed when they come home "naked," hiding under the bed in shame.

However, the fact that your new groomer was able to clip him is a hopeful sign. Rebook him on a regular basis so he can get used to her and the grooming experience. Understandably, many groomers will not even attempt to work on dogs with behavior problems because it is stressful and dangerous.

Where do you go from here? Right back to Square One. You and your husband need to desensitize your dog by handling him every single day. Start by petting and stroking him, holding his paws, rubbing his tummy, touching his face, legs and tail. Talk to him soothingly as you perform this "massage." If he gets antsy and tries to leave, gently but firmly hold him down and stroke him for a few minutes more, a subtle exercise in imposing your will rather than letting him be the boss. After several days of this, introduce the slicker brush, using it only for a few minutes at first and gradually increasing until you are able to brush at least one-quarter of his body at a time. Praise him and give him a treat at the end of each session.

And get yourself a grooming table. Not only will it give you more control than brushing him on your lap or on the floor, it will make it a lot less scary when he goes back to the grooming salon. If he starts to bite, don't reward his bad behavior by stopping. Give him a very firm "No!" and continue. Have your husband help with this, holding him firmly and carefully from underneath while you work.

So far, his little temper tantrums have worked well for him so you may need to call in a professional trainer to get him to accept grooming. He may also need medication from his veterinarian to calm him down as he learns, but with the right attitude and some skilled professionals in your corner, you can overcome these pooch panic attacks and get him used to the grooming procedure.