

## Teach Your Dog Brushing Is a Good Thing

**Positive reinforcement and plenty of treats can teach a longhaired dog to enjoy brushing.**

*By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG*

Q. My sister has a two-year-old male Malamute mix who gets somewhat aggressive when her husband attempts to brush him. He has long hair so they don't want him to get matted. His other owners did not brush him so maybe it's because he's not used to it. Do you have any suggestions for us so we can brush his coat? He does not bite when we try, he just growls.

A. To answer your question thoroughly, I consulted Linda Johnson, a certified dog obedience trainer and talented groomer who handles large dogs with behavioral issues on her grooming table every day. I have witnessed her techniques firsthand as she turns recalcitrant heavy-coated customers like some Huskies and Chow Chows into docile and cooperative animals who no longer take offense at getting brushed, having their nails cut, or being blown dry.

"What you have to do is change how the dog thinks about being brushed," Linda says. "You need to use a lot of positive reinforcement as you gently brush the dog. As long as the dog is not growling or acting up, use lots of gentle praise like 'good dog.' It also helps to reward them really with good food treats like freeze-dried liver that they will only get while being brushed."

She advises keeping sessions short, five minutes or so at first, employing a slow and systematic approach as you set about changing your pet's mindset and defusing his resistance to brushing. You don't need to raise your voice or sound angry, but if he growls, use a sharp "ah-ah" noise rather than "no." "It has to be a very positive thing," Linda says, "but remember, you don't want to praise growling."

Linda has adopted adult dogs with behavior problems like Zeke, an Australian Cattle Dog. "He did not like his tail or back end being brushed at all, but of course I had to groom him and dry him off when wet." Her gentle persuasion, using lots of praise and food rewards, worked so well that now Zeke is first in line when it's time for her personal pack of dogs to get brushed. "I would never tolerate my dogs' not allowing me to do things I need to do to them," she says. "As a dog owner, you are the leader; you're in charge whether they like it or not."

If their dog is not food-driven like Zeke, Linda suggests building the brushing into an activity he loves, like playing ball. For some dogs, "sweet talk" using a high-pitched happy tone, is music to their ears. "Dogs communicate through body language, eye contact and tones," she says. "You need to learn what motivates your dog. You can win them over as long as you're careful not to praise the behavior you are trying to correct."

Your sister's dog has a double coat and will require regular brushing on a weekly basis to prevent matting and shed hair that builds up into solid pockets we call "packing." In addition to a curved-bristle wire slicker brush, an undercoat rake with teeth long enough to penetrate that coat will help keep him in good shape. If they bathe him at home, he should be thoroughly brushed out first, and after rinsing the shampoo from his coat, a final rinse with conditioner will cut down on static electricity and make post-bath brushing and blow-drying much easier. You are right in assuming that he is not used to brushing because his previous owners did not do it. If he had been brushed since puppyhood, your sister would not be having this problem, but the good news is it can be remedied with patience and love.