

Catching a Fearful Dog



Any animal feels most safe when they have control over their environment; when they have a choice. The best way to help a fearful dog (or cat, etc.) feel safe is almost always to give them a choice to move away if they want to. Forcing them to do something they are afraid of will likely increase their fear, and delay or set back progress. This is true for touching, picking up and holding a fearful dog. The best way to build trust with them is, as often as possible, to offer them a choice, and to work on having them want to come to you.

However, there are times when it is necessary to touch and pick up a fearful dog, even if they don't want it. These are most often in the case of health and safety, such as giving medication, checking injury, taking them to the vet, moving them away from hazards, etc.

As part of preparing our fearful dogs for their forever homes, we at NMDR work on teaching our fearful dogs to wait to be picked up when necessary. When they learn this, most of the time they do not because they want to be picked up – after all, they are fearful. Instead, they learn to stay still because they have no choice. We are pretty good at catching fearful dogs, so they learn that we will catch them no matter what, so they may as well just submit. This condition is called “learned helplessness,” and is not a good state of mind for a dog (or anyone) to be in, so again it is best to limit using it unless really necessary.

For those necessary times, we work on teaching the dogs to stay still for the word “wait.” Below is the procedure for doing this.

Please note that, although this is a scary experience for fearful dogs, when we have to do it, we can also use it to work on teaching the dog to feel better about it. The way to do this is to try always to have there be a “payoff” as a result of the touch/pick up. The best payoffs for fearful survivors of commercial breeding facilities are often food, going to a fun place (e.g. outside if they like it), and social contact with dogs they like. So, every time you must pick up a fearful dog, be ready to give them a payoff. Examples are:

- Give them a piece of high value food. At NMDR we use cooked chicken and cheese. If they won't take with while you are holding them (and most will not because they are scared), give it to them after you put them down. If they won't take it from your hand, put it on the ground. Even if they don't take it then, keep offering it to them every time you have to pick them up. They will learn with repetition that something potentially good happens after the scary experience, and over time they may learn to be less scared by it.
- Take them to a place they like. This can be outside, or to a safe place like their crate, if they like these places. Offer them the food as well in these cases.
- Let them play with other dogs, if they enjoy it. Most survivors of commercial breeding facilities do like other dogs, and often depend on them for confidence.

With time, the dog's reaction to the “wait” word for being picked up may change. Some dogs might seem to mind it less, and a few may look like they like it. There are some dogs who never learn to like it, and for these dogs, the best, safest home you can give them is one where they show you their affection in ways other than physical contact, with happy greetings when you arrive home, bright eyes and tail wags.

Important note: when a dog starts to take food while you are holding them, then it is OK to start practicing it when you want, and not only when it is really necessary. Feed them every time you pick them up, and while you are holding them.

How to Do It

- Facing away from dog, move slowly toward dog
- Turn to dog without making direct eye contact. Spread arms to limit dog's lateral movement options.
- Slowly move toward dog. Look at dog but not at her eyes.
- Don't chase the dog. Move side to side to limit them moving around you. You may need to maneuver them into a corner or against a wall.
- When within touching distance, cue **"Wait."**
- Slowly reach toward dog with one hand, using the other in front of the dog to keep dog in place.
- Cue **"Touch."**
- Touch dog with very light pressure on the dog's chest: first just enough to touch fur without pressure on skin, then light pressure on skin, then moderate pressure.
- Move other hand toward dog and place on dog's back. Hold dog in place a few seconds. If at any point dog tries to jump out of your hold, don't try to hold on to her. Hold only when dog is still; don't grab the dog while she is jumping or running.
- Cue **"Pick Up."**
- Gently slide your hand around and under dog, and with other hand on dog's chest to stabilize, slowly pick the dog up. Keep the dog's face at least 12" from your face.
- Pull the dog toward your body in the "football" carry position.
- Walk slowly toward your destination. If at any time the dog begins to struggle, stop walking, relax hold pressure slightly and speak in soft, gentle tones to reassure the dog
- When you're ready to put the dog down, crouch slowly. When you are crouching/kneeling, slowly place dog on floor or bed. If dog jumps out of your hold, let her go. If she stays in your hands after you have set her down, hold her for a few seconds, pet/scratch her gently and speak in a soft, reassuring tone. Offer her some high value treats, even if she doesn't eat.

See video demonstration at <>