



## Canine Gentling – Building Trust and Respect

### The Puppy (or Kitten, Adult Dog or Cat)

**Gentling** is a collection of handling techniques to help you intentionally develop the personality that will make your puppy a delight for life. For best results, the pup should begin these steps at 4 - 12 weeks old, or a kitten 3-7 weeks old. For older pets, just go much more slowly and give more treats.

#### The reasons to do **Gentling** are:

- 1) It establishes that you are bigger and stronger than the pup, but still gentle and non-threatening
- 2) Once you are trusted as a positive leader and protector, the pup will bond and want to follow your instructions
- 3) Demonstrating gentle leadership significantly reduces inappropriate aggressive behavior
- 4) During *Gentling*, nothing bad happens so the pup develops *trust and respect for you*
- 5) The puppy becomes accustomed to routine examination, grooming, and human handling

The pup may experience a small amount of stress. When mild stress is experienced, but nothing bad happens, it builds puppy self-confidence, which contributes to a friendly confident adult personality. If the dog becomes stiff, panics or threatens aggression during any of these exercises, stop and consult a trainer or behaviorist.

Before you can teach your puppy anything, you must communicate that you have the right (hierarchy status) to teach. This means showing the puppy that you and all humans in your house are positive human leaders to the pup. Leaders control resources, and movement.

Gentling has several components: *Suspension*, *Hug-Squeeze*, *Stroking*, *Massage*, *Range of Motion* and *Hold Still* (also known as the “X-Ray Position”).

**Suspension** means suspending the puppy in space with one hand under each front leg holding the dog the way you pick up a human toddler. Smile (no teeth!) and baby talk to show you are not threatening. If struggling, it is OK to allow the back legs to rest on your belt to stabilize the pup. This position is signaling “Maternal Safety” because in the wild, the mother suspends the pup while moving it to a safe location. Therefore, suspension triggers the neurologic, “Immobilization Reflex” causing the pup to become passive. The instant the puppy looks away, move on to a hug. Looking away is deferring to your leadership and is a calming signal. An immediate release from suspension rewards the and builds trust when you respond in a positive way to the calming signal.

**Hug-Squeeze** has two parts. First, simply hug the pup with one hand supporting the body, and controlling the back legs. Place the other hand cupped over the skull holding the pup’s head against your shoulder. First, you must relax your own body muscle tone completely and give an audible sigh. If the pup relaxes and accepts the hug there is no need to squeeze. If the pup, “asks to get down” by squirming, don’t release. Instead, while acting very relaxed, SQUEEZE the pup against your body. Ignore vocalization. When the pup relaxes, release immediately to reward cooperativity and build trust. Then quickly put the pup down and give a treat to reward the relaxation.



**Cradling** means cradling the dog upside down in your arms like a human baby. Most dogs try to right themselves by spinning, but don't allow it. It is important that you show a relaxed face, smile and use baby talk to assure the puppy that you are not a threat. When the dog settles, immediately release to reward that good decision to cooperate and trust.

**Stroking** is a very specific way of petting a dog. Hold the dog with one hand, then with the other hand, touch the nose, then stroke over the closed eyes, ears, top of head, then down the neck, back, rump and continue to the end of the tail. Press down firmly as you stroke at least 3 times. You are taking control of the dog's senses (smelling, seeing, hearing) and controlling the social power spots, (top of head, scruff, back, rump and tail). Talk happy, and give a treat when done to reward the dog giving over control of all these important parts of the body.

**Massage** is different from stroking. During massage, you move the skin over underlying body as far as it will go in every direction. Do it gently with a loving touch, not pinching the skin. Move it back and forth and in a circular motion. Do this body massage over every square inch of the dog. This is how the dog becomes accustomed to having people touch its ears, paws, belly, tail, gums, etc.

The two most important areas to massage are feet, and the muzzle including the gums. Massaging the gums is important to prepare the dog for teeth brushing, and handling the feet prepares the dog for nail grooming. As you massage, feel for any bumps, mats, stickers, scabs or anything else abnormal.

**Range of Motion** means gently moving the puppy's extremities. Once you can massage your puppy without him struggling, begin move his head and limbs in every comfortable position. This uses your hands to teach the pup that you are the leader and trustworthy. Be sure that there is no discomfort while you are doing this exercise. Pretend you are the vet examining the pet and give treats frequently during the process.

**Hold Still** means gently holding the puppy still (e.g. a hug!) For any position you choose, the pet must accept and relax in that position. Just hold the pet still while talking soothingly. When the pet relaxes and accepts the restraint, release and give a food treat.

Start Gentling as soon as possible, and **do it daily** until the pet has such trust that he or she acts like a rag doll in your hands. If the pet seems fearful, proceed in small steps and use more food. If the pet seems to panic, stop Gentling until the pet relaxes. In each case, allow no more than a small amount of fear, then hold still until he or she relaxes. Acceptance is very age dependent. An 3 month old puppy will usually accept Gentling immediately, but the same pup at 4 months old might resist, and at 5 months of age become much more resistant. Therefore, do these gentling exercises at least weekly, and daily is better.

Watch The Pet's Body Language For These Signs...	
<b><i>You can see fear/anxiety when:</i></b>	<b><i>You can see the pet relax when:</i></b>
1) Muscle tone increases, or struggling	The muscles relax
2) The pet begins mouthing of your hands	The mouthing turns to gentle licking
3) The pupil size and white of the eye increase	The wild look in the eye goes away
4) Thrashing, urinating, crying or obvious panic	The pet may take a deep sigh



## MANAGING FEAR RESPONSES

When any mild signs of fear or anxiety appear, (1 or 2 in the chart above) act and talk relaxed, sigh loudly and hold the pup firmly right there. Offer a food treat as distraction. See if the puppy relaxes after several seconds, or will nibble on a food treat. Get the pet to relax before releasing. Then gradually return to the level of handling that previously caused the first sign of stress. You are literally, “expanding the pet’s comfort zone.” Using the food treat does not reward the stress; it changes the area of brain processing.

If level #3-4 (thrashing) is reached, you have overdone the handling for this dog on this day. Stop, try for a relaxed “make up” then go much more slowly and gently after several seconds of time out. Note that if the dog does become stressed to this degree, it means this dog is at risk of developing serious behavior problems in the future, and it is important that we return to these Gentling exercises with a more gentle touch. The purpose of these exercises is to develop respect for, and trust in the handler.

When relaxation signs appear, release the puppy and reward the relaxation. By doing the manipulation, then releasing after puppy relaxation, you have decreased that puppy’s fear, built its confidence and increased its trust in you as its leader. You want the puppy to learn that the way to get freedom is to “give it up and relax.” Massage, move and restrain him in many different positions until he relaxes. The goal is a dog that acts like a limp rag doll because s/he trusts you so much.

Since there is no pain involved, **Gentling** establishes you as a positive trustworthy leader without the need for scolding or physical punishment. This not only creates a gentle adult dog, but also bonds the pup to you for life.