



Puppy Raising

Handling, grooming and equipment

Version 1.2

Updated September 2024

Sections

There are 5 topics within this document. By following each link below you will be directed straight to that area of guidance.

- 1. Physical checks**
- 2. Vet visits**
- 3. Collar hold**
- 4. Equipment**
- 5. Grooming**



1. Physical checks

In this section

In this section, you'll help your puppy remain comfortable whilst introducing your puppy to being handled at home, at the vets and when being groomed.


By the end of your puppy raising journey, we would ideally like your puppy to:

- Remain still and comfortable during full body checks and grooming.
- Be relaxed when using standard Guide Dogs equipment.
- Be calm when examined by a vet or veterinary nurse.

Quick links


By following the link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.

 **Why**

 **Knowing your puppy**

 **Managing for success**

 **Teaching foundations**

 **Being a partnership**

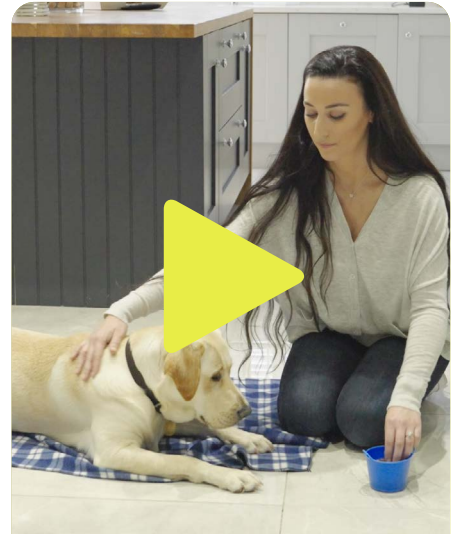


Why

Why is this important for a guide dog?

Touching, handling and grooming aren't activities we should do to puppies – instead, they should be things your puppy actively chooses to participate in. This will not only improve their welfare but also make health-checking easier for their future partner when they are health checked weekly and groomed regularly.

Your puppy will likely need to be restrained at some point in their life for a veterinary procedure (blood tests, having their ears and eyes checked etc). These experiences can be stressful for dogs, therefore it's important to prepare them for these events in a positive way.



[Video](#): Guide dog owner fitting equipment and at vets.



Knowing your puppy

- It's easy to take for granted the fact that we can touch, handle, lift and hold young puppies, often without seeing any obvious signs that they are uncomfortable with this. However, if we start to observe our puppies behaviour and body language closely when we touch, reach for, and handle them, it's actually very common to see a range of signs that suggest some discomfort.
- Please read the document [Body language in foundation knowledge](#) as a reminder on understanding what your puppy is communicating.

- A lot of dogs are uncomfortable with a person's hands going over their head (often turning or moving the head away in young pups or jumping up in older pups). This action we commonly do as part of stroking in fact covers a dog's senses (eyes and ears). Whilst we assume dogs enjoy this, for a lot of dogs this is a positive association they need to learn, or alternatively you might discover they prefer a tickle under the chin.
- Is your puppy due any veterinary appointments (vaccinations) or procedures (neutering)? If an appointment is nearing, think about which parts of their body will be handled or may have pain associated with them and use this information to prioritise the areas you'll focus on with the exercises outlined below.
- If your puppy has recently been or, is in pain/discomfort, then you should delay working on these exercises until you can be confident that they are in good health.
- If your puppy is over nine months old and is marked for the breeding programme, your Dog Health Wellbeing Specialist can tell you more about any restraint positions they may experience.



Most puppies prefer a tickle under the chin than on the top of their head.



Managing for success

- Complete these training exercises when your puppy is calm and comfortable.
- Use rewards from part of your puppy's daily food allowance or calm praise for these exercises. Please read the document [puppy progression chart](#) for a definition of rewards.
- Try to avoid touching your puppy and giving them a food reward at the same time, as this could mask any feeling of discomfort. Your puppy may be so distracted by the food that they don't move away when they would like to. Keep food rewards out of sight of your puppy i.e. not constantly in your hands.
- This exercise is about your puppy learning to be comfortable with handling and staying close to you, rather than you following your puppy around. To help with this, and for your comfort, you can lay out a folded towel or blanket for you to sit or kneel on and station yourself on it throughout.
- You may need to take your puppy to the Vet or restrain them before you have finished teaching these exercises. If so, consider how they may react to this and aim to make the experience as positive as possible.



Handling should become part of your puppy's everyday life.



Stage 1: Being comfortable and open to being touched

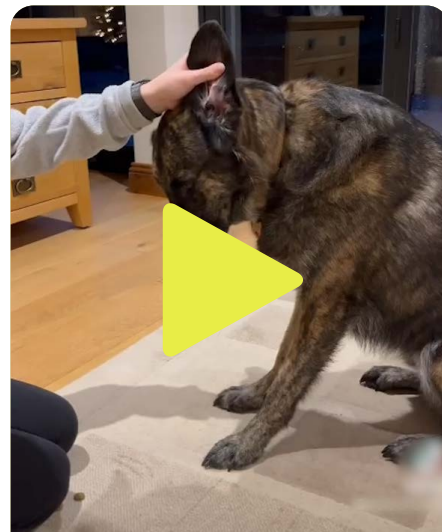
Our aim is for your puppy to be comfortable and open to being touched and handled by you.

- Position yourself so that you can easily touch your puppy all over.
- Start by briefly touching your puppy in an 'easy' place (for example under the chin, or along the side), giving them a food reward after each touch.
- Gently and gradually build this up so that you can touch all areas of your puppy. It is important that you watch your puppy's body language and allow your puppy to move away at any point if they want to.
 - If they remain still and comfortable when you touch them, you can then give them a food reward. If they move away, allow a few seconds to refocus before trying again. If they move away again, then stop the session.
- When you start a new session or if your puppy showed any signs of being uncomfortable on the last touch, start again by stroking somewhere they have been comfortable being touched previously. Do this several times, touching your puppy and rewarding them, without them moving away, before you progress.

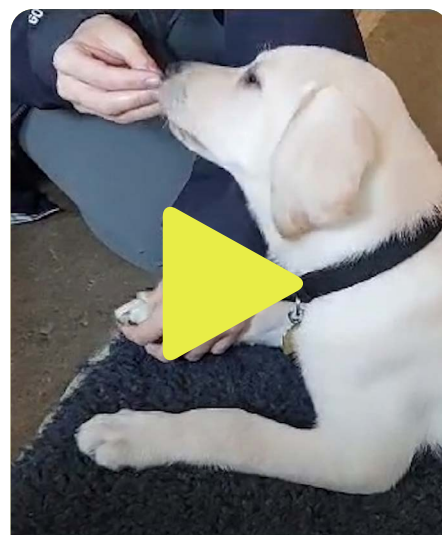
Stage 2: Build up duration

Our aim is to build up the amount of time your puppy is comfortable with having a body part handled, similar to the time it could be held for examination.

- Hold and gently move/lift one body part for a few seconds, such as lifting a foot followed by a reward.
- Over a few repetitions gradually build this up to 5 seconds. Mix this up by doing a longer hold then a shorter hold. Progression isn't always linear.



Video: Touching a puppy's head.



Video: Checking puppy's feet.



Being a partnership

Stage 3: Get your puppy used to being handled by other people

Our aim is to build on this so your puppy is comfortable being touched by unfamiliar people.

- Once your puppy is comfortable with you practicing these exercises, get someone else to do this with them. This will help to prepare them for being handled by other people during their lifetime, including by veterinary staff, trainers, and a future partner. Remember as it's someone new, it's a good idea to go back a step to short touches to start with to make it easier for your puppy.

Progression

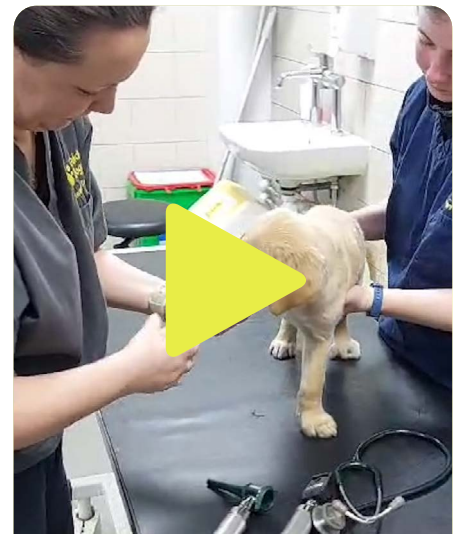
Once your Puppy Development Advisor (PDA) confirms that your puppy is comfortable with certain parts of the body being touched, you can progress this to replicate the start of some of the veterinary holds/restraints commonly used to examine dogs, for example:

Trunk hold

- Place your hand on the back of your puppy, following up with a reward.
- Repeat this a few times.
- Now reach your hand over their back and touch the right-hand side of their body, following up with a reward.
- Repeat this a few times.
- On the next repetition, rest your arm on their back for a few seconds and follow up with a reward.
- As above and gently hold them towards your body
- Reward and repeat.



Build positive associations with your vets by visiting outside of your appointments.



Video: Restraint introduction.

Muzzle hold

- Go back to having your hand near your puppy's chin and following this with a reward. Repeat this a few times.
- Lightly put your finger under their chin and follow up immediately with a reward.
- Repeat a few times.
- Gradually over a few sessions, increase the numbers of fingers you place under their chin until you have all four.
- On the next session, as well as placing your fingers under your puppy's chin and allow your thumb to rest on their muzzle.
- Reward and repeat.
- Gradually increase the time you hold their muzzle for up to 5 seconds remembering that progression isn't always linear.

Practice these exercises in different environments such as the garden and on different surfaces such as on rubber matting or vinyl flooring. This will help them to get used to different surfaces that might be used in veterinary clinics.

Over time, reduce the number or type of rewards used. To do this, gradually increase the areas of the body that you touch prior to rewarding. So, for example, rather than just running your hand down one leg, you might do two legs, then three, then all four before rewarding.

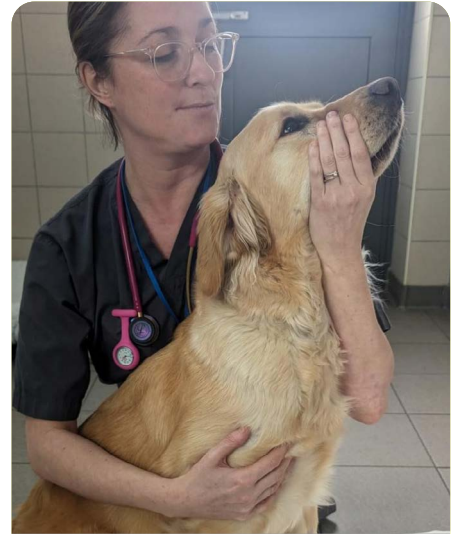


Photo: Young puppy muzzle hold.



Being a partnership

- Keep sessions short with lots of breaks. Your aim is to always end before they move away or wriggle. Moving away or wriggling is feedback that they're uncomfortable in some way. If this occurs, on the next repetition or session, go back to a point that you know they were comfortable.
- You will gradually build positive associations with being touched all over. Always remember to watch their body language and any movement as this will tell you how they feel about the interaction. Any signs of backing away, lip licking, or any vocalisations are something you should let us know about.
- Respecting and responding to their communication will allow you to progress faster by giving your puppy an element of choice and control in the interaction.
- Forming and maintaining these positive associations with being touched and handled builds solid foundations and a large trust 'bank account'. This is important to protect against withdrawals (treatments) from the trust 'bank account' that will undoubtedly happen throughout their life. This again forms the foundations of your puppy co-operating with you, and a future partner dealing with their health care.
- It's important to continue to use some rewards throughout the time your puppy is with you to ensure they maintain positive associations with touch.



Let your puppy approach you and if they move away wait for them to re-engage.

2. Vet visits

Quick links

By following the link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.



Why



Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



Teaching foundations



Being a partnership



Why

Why is this important for a guide dog?

Having a dog who is uncomfortable about entering or being handled at the vets can be really challenging for a guide dog owner to manage. Many veterinary practices welcome 'social visits' from dogs. Taking your puppy to the vets outside of normal appointment times can be helpful to build a positive association.



Knowing your puppy

- Your puppy should be comfortable wearing a lead and collar prior to completing social visits at the vets. Chat to your Vet and your PDA to ensure this is suitable for your puppy.



Managing for success

- Give your veterinary practice a call to find out if social visits are acceptable and find out a quiet time to pop in.
- Take rewards that your puppy likes, this could be a favourite toy, stuffed KONG ® or Lickimat (taken from their daily allowance), and a familiar blanket.
- When you go into the vets, think about the best place for you to take your puppy (generally away from doors and with space from other animals) so that they can take in the environment at their own pace without too much close by.



Every guide dog has to have a vet check twice a year.



Teaching foundations

- Allow your puppy to settle on the blanket with a chew or toy or Lickimat etc.
- Initially, ask a member of staff to come over and give your puppy a few rewards and a fuss. Keep an eye on your puppy's body language to ensure they remain comfortable.
- End the session after your puppy has finished their enrichment item.
- On a subsequent visit, take your puppy inside one of the consultation rooms, make it fun and see if they are happy to step on the scales at some point during your visit (this isn't about weighing them, just investigating at this stage).

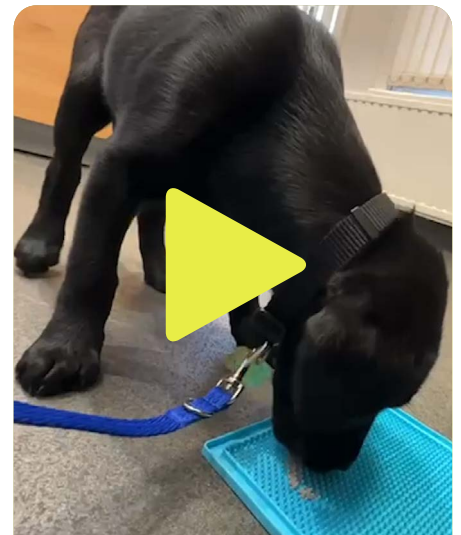
Progression

If you're able to, do another free social visit going into a consulting room where your puppy is given a fuss and a light touch physical check in the same way you have done at home.



Being a partnership

- If at any point your puppy looks uncomfortable, cut the session short and try again another day.
- Remember, you know your puppy, you're their advocate and from reading their body language, you may need to suggest a break, pause in proceedings or delay to another session. Highlighting to us as early on as possible that your puppy has shown any signs of being uncomfortable will help us support you and your puppy in the most effective way.



[Video:](#) Intro to vets' surgery.

3. Collar hold

Quick links

By following the link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.



Why



Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



Teaching foundations



Being a partnership



Why

Why is this important for a guide dog?

- For safety reasons, your puppy needs to be comfortable with someone taking hold of their collar so as not to shy away from hands reaching out towards it. If anyone needs to stop your puppy for safety reasons, then it's likely to be their collar they will reach for and hold. Your puppy therefore needs to learn to be comfortable with people taking hold of it. Grabbing your puppy's collar without teaching them there is nothing to worry about, can lead them to shy away from hands reaching out, avoiding, or mouthing when being held by the collar.
- When off the lead, some puppies learn to 'dance' out of reach because being held by the collar signals to them the end of fun. This is particularly difficult for a guide dog owner to manage; it may cause embarrassment and lead to anxiety if they are unable to get their dog back.



Knowing your puppy

- This exercise is based on you reading your puppy's body language and responding to it. Be aware of any subtle signs that your puppy is uncomfortable, such as lip licking, yawning, turning their head away, ducking or moving away as their collar is reached for. Please read the document [Foundation knowledge: Understanding your dog for more information](#).



Managing for success

- Your puppy should be comfortable with having their collar put on and wearing it before you start this exercise.
- Limit how often you reach for or hold your puppy by their collar. Even when they are comfortable with this, there should be little need for you to hold them in this way. Consider using other techniques suitable for the situation such as your voice, putting them on a lead or behind a barrier instead.



Teaching foundations

Stage 1: Creating positive associations

Our aim is for your puppy to have a positive association with hands approaching and touching around their head area.

- Touch your puppy under the chin and follow this up with a reward.
- Repeat this several times.
- Now touch your puppy by their ear and follow this up with a reward.
- Repeat this several times.
- Touch the opposite ear and follow this up with a reward.
- Repeat this several times.
- Gradually build up to your hand approaching their collar (without touching it). Follow up each repetition with a reward.

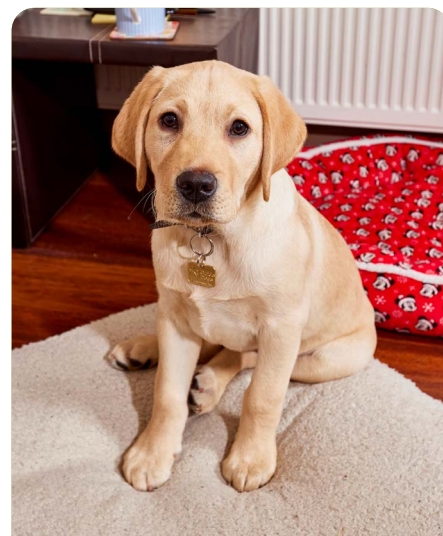


Photo: Puppy comfortable wearing a collar.

- Once you see your puppy looking or acting expectantly when your hand approaches their head area (this could be gently wagging their tail or looking up/moving towards you) you can then assume you have created the association.

Stage 2: Touching the collar

Our aim is that your puppy is comfortable with you reaching out, touching and holding their collar.

- Start to touch their collar, initially for a second followed up by a reward.
- Over a few sessions increase the time you touch the collar for (up to 10 seconds), each time following up with a reward.
- Increase how long you hold the collar up to 10 seconds.

Progression

- Progress to moving your hand towards them more quickly, gradually building up to simulating a 'hold', which may happen in real life.
- Once you're able to hold your puppy's collar for 10 seconds ask someone else to hold them by the collar briefly and to then follow this up with a food reward.

Once your puppy is relaxed with you holding their collar, you can also teach them to tolerate body restraint alongside their collar being held.



Our aim is that your puppy is comfortable with you reaching out, touching and holding their collar.



Being a partnership

Your puppy might follow your hand initially to see what is happening, after a few repetitions this should stop. If they continue to do so they might not be comfortable with the stage, you are at. Slow your hand down and consider going back a stage.

Other subtle signs that your puppy is uncomfortable could be snatching food rewards (if they don't usually do this), mouthing or not wanting to approach you. Either go back a step or build things up more gradually, for example:

- Reach your arm towards them, following up with a food reward.
- Reach your arm out, touch your puppy on the back, following up with a food reward.

If your puppy does have any veterinary procedures or checks and you're not present for these, then you can ask your Veterinary Practice for feedback on how they managed with any restraint required as well as the findings of the check-up.



Photo: Holding the collar.

4. Equipment

Quick links

By following the link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.



Why



Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



Teaching foundations



Being a partnership



Why

Why is this important for a guide dog?

During your puppy's career, they will wear various pieces of equipment. It's very important that you introduce equipment in a gradual and positive way and that your puppy is comfortable since this will have a lasting impact on how they feel about wearing equipment in the future, including the guiding harness.



Knowing your puppy

- New pieces of equipment may initially feel odd, uncomfortable, or restrictive when your puppy is first introduced to them. Observing your puppy's behaviour will show you if this the case and how many of the steps below you may need to follow. If you're unsure, please contact us.
- Remember every puppy is different so, it's important that you know what rewards your puppy likes.
- Guide dog puppies should only wear Guide Dogs issued and approved equipment for insurance reasons. You must check all equipment is in good condition prior to use. Do not use equipment if faulty or if damage is found, please call Guide Line to order a replacement.
- Prioritise the introduction of essential equipment first, like their collar and lead, before moving on to other items. Avoid overwhelming your puppy with too much new equipment at once.
- If your PDA thinks it will be of benefit to your puppy, they will cover the introduction and use of any alternative veterinary or grooming equipment, such as clippers and vet equipment, within puppy class or on visits.



Being comfortable wearing equipment is a key aspect of being a guide dog.



Managing for success

- Ideally, you'll introduce equipment before you need your puppy to wear it, rather than putting it on and hoping for the best. However, there may be times when it's necessary for them to wear equipment that you haven't been able to train and prepare them for. In these cases, use food rewards, a Lickimat, KONG ® or similar to distract them whilst you fit the equipment, and reward them once it's been fitted.
- When teaching this exercise, a key part is that your puppy is moving towards you/the equipment. It's equally important that there is space for them to move away from the equipment while you remain where you are. If it helps you to stay still, sit or kneel.

- When introducing the collar, start without the tag.
- Any tightening or loosening of equipment should be completed when not on your puppy.
- Your PDA will advise and support you with fitting equipment on visits and in puppy classes.



Always speak to your PDA before introducing a new item of equipment.



Teaching foundations

Stage 1: Introducing equipment

Our aim for this stage is for your puppy to form positive associations with new pieces of equipment and to choose to close the distance between you, rather than you moving towards your puppy. This equipment might include the collar, lead, puppy coat and veterinary equipment such as an Elizabethan collar.

Top tip: Your puppy doesn't need to do anything specific to 'earn' the food rewards at this stage. You are simply pairing the presence of the new equipment with food or play which your puppy enjoys, so that when you pick up the equipment, they know that something good is going to follow.

- Start with the piece of equipment hidden behind your back.
 - Bring the equipment out in front of you, so that it's visible to your puppy, and immediately offer a food reward or play.
 - Move the equipment out of sight again and stop rewarding or playing with them.
 - Repeat this process until you can see your puppy looking or acting expectantly when the equipment appears (this could be gently wagging their tail or looking up/moving towards you).
 - Once your puppy is interested (for example shows a waggy tail or looks up at you expectantly) and is keen to be around the equipment, reinforce any interactions with or approaches towards the equipment whilst
- 18** keeping the equipment held out to one side.

- Keep the equipment and your hand still, letting your puppy move towards it, rather than moving the equipment towards your puppy.
- If your puppy remains comfortable around the equipment, you can begin to touch them gently with the equipment for a second and follow this up with a food reward.
- Repeat several times in different places.

Stage 2: Getting used to the noise of the clips

Our aim for this stage is for your puppy to get used to the noise of the clips so that when you fasten any equipment this is familiar.

- With your puppy at a distance from the equipment, clip and unclip the quick release mechanism. This will allow your puppy to get used to the sound that this makes, without it being too close.
- Follow this with a reward.
- Repeat a few times.

Stage 3: Putting the equipment on

Our aim for this stage is to be able to fasten the clips of the equipment and then to have your puppy comfortably moving around wearing it. This may take several sessions to achieve.

If your puppy is not approaching you, remaining still, backing away from you or scratching or chewing at the equipment when on, please speak to your PDA.

- Start by touching your puppy with the equipment as before, or by getting them to put their head into the equipment if you have taught this (for example Elizabethan collars.)
- Leaving the fastening undone and immediately reward, for a few seconds.

19 Hold the equipment in place.

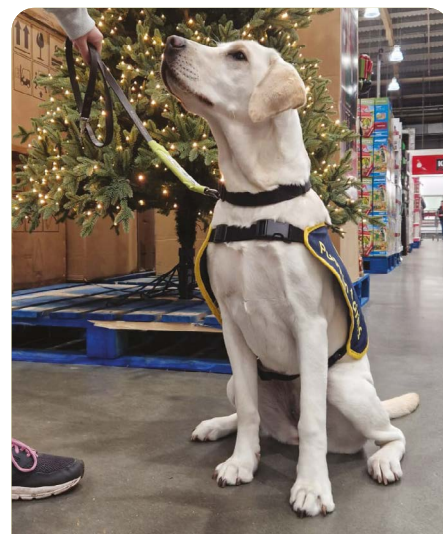


Photo: Puppy jacket.



Photo: T-touch correct fitting.

- Say 'Out' and then remove the equipment and give your puppy a reward.
- Repeat this process, increasing the length of time your puppy has the equipment on for up to 10 seconds. Your PDA will view fitting equipment and be able to provide advice and support.
- Increase the time between rewards with varied time intervals.

Stage 4: Fastening the equipment

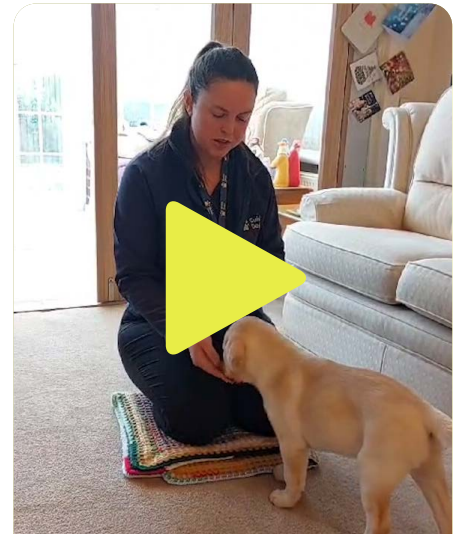
- If your puppy has the equipment on and is not showing any signs of backing out of or moving away, start fastening the clips whilst they are wearing it.
- Put the equipment on (or have them put their head in) and when your puppy is standing or sitting, play a game or give them a reward.
- Do up the clips and give a few more rewards.
- Immediately undo the clips and give your puppy a reward and take the equipment off.
- Repeat this a few times and end the session.

Stage 5: Wearing equipment

- Gradually build up the amount of time your puppy is wearing the equipment.
- Do this by playing with them to make the experience of moving around in the equipment a positive one. You can also give them a chew or feed them their next meal where appropriate.
- For the collar only: After a week of your young puppy wearing the collar comfortably, you can add the ID tag.
- Monitor your puppy's body language.

Progression

Once you've worked through this yourself start to get other familiar people to practice with your puppy and then finally a few unfamiliar people too.



Video: Young puppy having collar and lead fitted good practice.

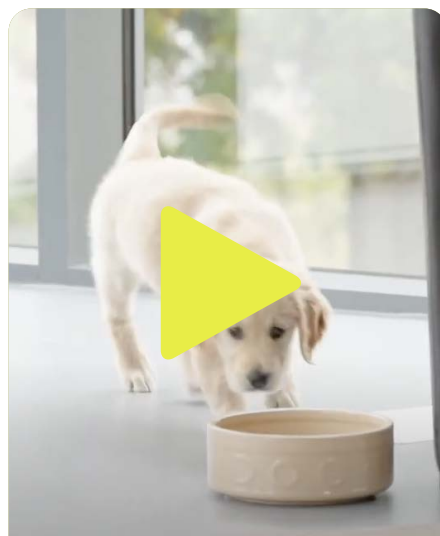


Being a partnership

- This exercise is all about reading what your puppy is saying.
- Quit when you're ahead. Don't be tempted to push anything too quickly or for too long.
- If at any stage they wriggle or jump up at you, stop and move the piece of equipment away from them. Wait quietly until they calm again and go back to using food rewards to reward stillness. It's important to be consistent with this as fitting the equipment when they're wriggling will reward this behaviour.
- If your puppy is wearing a piece of equipment and starts to look uncomfortable, distract them by moving yourself or encouraging them to engage in a game. Once you've successfully distracted them, say 'Out', remove the equipment and reward.
- If you're struggling to distract your puppy from the equipment, put a few of their biscuits on the floor and remove the equipment as the puppy is eating. End the session there and try again another time, reassess to understand what your puppy is telling you and how you can progress their next session.
- Even when your puppy has been wearing equipment for some time or if they have had a break from wearing equipment occasionally reward them for having it put on and taken off again.
- If you find your puppy struggles to wear the equipment for a longer period, please contact us.



Don't forget once your puppy is used to wearing their collar, they should wear their ID disc at all times.



Video: Early intro of equipment.

5. Grooming

Quick links

By following the link below, you will be directed to the area within this guidance to support that area of learning.



Why



Knowing your puppy



Managing for success



Teaching foundations



Being a partnership



Why

Why is this important for a guide dog?

We encourage daily grooming of our dogs at all stages of their lives to help ensure a healthy coat and reduce moulting in public spaces such as in cafes, shops and on public transport or in taxis. For guide dog owners, grooming their dog can be a great way to build and develop a bond, especially when they are first matched.

Sometimes puppies don't enjoy being groomed and want to move away or see it as a game. Either of these can be challenging for a guide dog owner to manage. By familiarising them with equipment (or similar sounds and feel) will therefore not only improve their welfare but also make it easier for you and a future partner when a veterinary procedure may be needed.



Knowing your puppy

- What previous experiences of grooming has your puppy had? Are they sore anywhere? What equipment are you likely to use first or most commonly, such as a towel or a brush? Knowing and planning grooming around their physical health will help make any grooming experiences positive.
- As with touching and handling, it's easy to miss subtle signs of discomfort in young puppies when we are brushing or touching them with equipment. Signs like biting and mouthing at a brush are often misinterpreted as play, when actually, your puppy is trying to communicate that they want the activity to stop. Of course, it could indeed be that your puppy is simply playing with the brush. The way to tell the difference is by closely observing their behaviour and body language.
- Always use grooming equipment in the direction of the lay of the fur as going against the lay of the fur can be uncomfortable for your puppy. On top of the head, legs and tail are sensitive areas that your puppy may need more time and support to get used to, so we recommend focussing on the chest, shoulders and back first.

The order in which to use grooming equipment is as follows:

- Zoom groom to remove loose fur and encourage growth.
- The soft bristle brush to dislodge dirt and dust and loose fur and encourage natural oils to give the coat shine.
- The comb (or rake for longer coats) to continue to dislodge any dirt and straighten the fur.



Grooming is an important part of bonding with their guide dog owner, as well as to maintain a healthy skin and coat.



Managing for success

- Keep your voice calm and gentle as this will help keep your puppy calm and be less likely to turn grooming into a game.
- To begin with, try to do these exercises when your puppy is calm.
- Keep sessions very short initially, just a minute or two



Stage 1: Introducing grooming equipment

- Grooming equipment can be initially introduced as outlined in the Stage 1 – Introducing equipment (detailed above). This will ensure your puppy associates grooming equipment with good things.

Stage 2: Using grooming equipment

- Once your puppy is comfortable around the various pieces of grooming equipment, you can then begin to use these to introduce grooming. The soft bristle brush is ideal to start with.
- Begin with the soft bristle brush on the chest. After each brief touch, calmly reward your puppy.
- Build up to short strokes down your puppy's chest back and sides following up with a reward.
- Gradually build up the number of brush strokes before following up with a reward.

Progression

- Once your puppy is settled with the brush, introduce the other equipment using the same methods. Be ready to take a step back if your puppy is unsure or trying to turn grooming into a game.
- Zoom groom: Zoom grooms work most effectively when some pressure is applied. Gradually build up this pressure over time, continuing to reward for stillness.
- Combs: Always hold the comb at a slight angle to the skin and ensure you don't apply too much pressure as this can be sore. Be especially careful around longer fur which may be matted. Only use the comb on back, chest and side and never on bony areas such as the legs and tail.

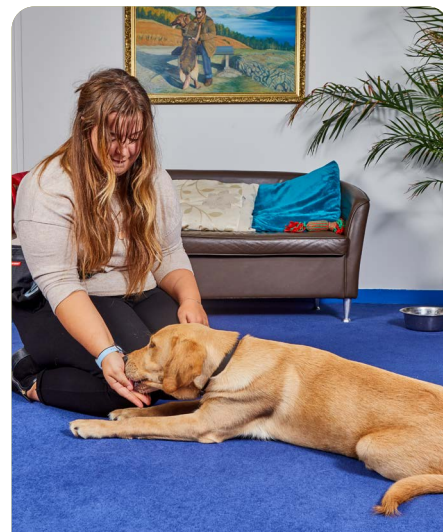
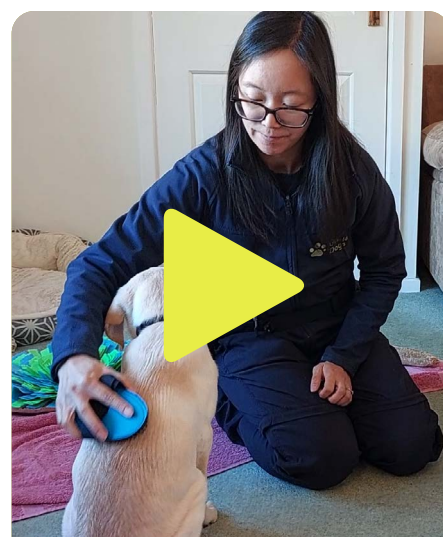


Photo: Grooming equipment.



Video: Intro to grooming equipment.



Being a partnership

- Make sure you give your puppy space to move away from you and the equipment if they choose. Avoid putting equipment on in confined spaces.
- If at any point your puppy starts mouthing or trying to play with the equipment, stop the exercise and hold the equipment behind your back. This way your puppy learns that stillness is the best way for interaction to continue and doesn't get into the habit of turning grooming into a game. If your puppy doesn't offer calmness or continues to want to mouth your hands or the equipment, give your puppy a toy to play with and try the exercise another time. If this happens again then let us know.



Keep initial grooming sessions short and positive experiences.