

The Tellington TTouch Method:

TTouch Bodywork for Stress Reduction, Enhanced Learning, and Confidence

By Jenn Merritt

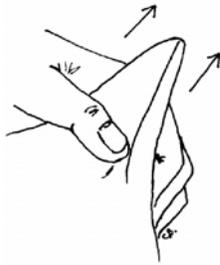
The Tellington TTouch Method is a way of relating and communicating with our animals through physical touch, body wraps, and movement exercises. The non-invasive, non-confrontational aspects of the TTouch Method make it an ideal complement to reward-based training techniques. The foundation of this method is bodywork known as TTouche—a variety of circular touches, lifts, and strokes performed with varying light pressures using different parts of the hand. The simplicity of the touches allows them to be easily demonstrated, quickly learned, and administered by anyone, making TTouch ideal for a variety of stressful classroom environments.

One of my biggest challenges teaching and participating in group dog training classes is managing dogs who are forced out of their physical and emotional comfort zones. In both classroom and performance environments, many dogs are put into a high state of stress and arousal while being expected to learn new behaviors and more appropriate responses to certain stimuli. Handlers become frustrated when dogs struggle with the learning process, shut down, or become reactive to their environment. The reality is that the dogs' physical and emotional states compromise their ability to learn new adaptive behaviors and impair their ability to process information. Think about trying to learn a new skill or concentrate on a complicated task after an intense argument or physical confrontation, with your adrenaline and stress hormones still pumping off the charts. By using TTouch bodywork to shift dogs out of these high states of arousal and into calmer mind-frames, they are able to learn new, more appropriate responses and behaviors.

The TTouch Method recognizes the relationship between what is occurring in the physical body and how the mind processes information and shapes behavior. If the body is filled with tension, it can have an impact on how the mind functions. Dogs that carry tension are more likely to be reactive, more likely to injure themselves while performing, and less able to retain new information. Releasing habitual body tension and changing posture can often have a positive impact on behavior.¹ An easy demonstration is to tense every muscle in your body as tight as you can and hold. After 10 seconds, release completely and evaluate how your posture changed as a result, and how it felt to let go of the tension. The light pressure of TTouch relaxes the physical body as it enhances the mind's ability to become engaged in learning.² Physical and physiological changes, such as postural adjustments and reduced respiration elicit behavioral and emotional changes, allowing the dog to better process new information and offer appropriate responses.³

When used in the canine classroom, the results of TTouch can be wide ranging and can include reduction of stress and arousal, increased focus, accelerated performance, and increased confidence in both your canine and human students. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of TTouch bodywork in the classroom is the effect it can have on the handlers. Inexperienced handlers often come into classes unskilled and overwhelmed, and not knowing how to calm their excited dogs. Introducing TTouch not only settles the dog, but can also settle and calm the human. Simple touches give handlers something to focus on, and they learn that they can have an influence their dog's emotional state and behavior without having to resort to dominance-based techniques. Experienced handlers in competitive and perform-

ance arenas appreciate having a new tool to help their dogs focus and thrive in competitive arenas. TTTouch can help everyone get into a better physical and mental state to learn and excel.



TTTouch differs from normal petting; it is lighter, gentler, slower and more focused. Instead of massaging or manipulating muscle, we concentrate on simply moving the skin, sometimes concentrating on particular areas of the body. Unlike massage, it is not necessary to have specialized knowledge of anatomy and musculature to take advantage of the many benefits of TTTouch.

The first TTTouch that I generally teach in classes is earwork. A dog's ears seem to be an area that people generally gravitate toward, and as a result most dogs are already comfortable with their ears being scratched and handled.

Unlike routine scratching of a dog's ear, however, earwork is done more slowly in a sliding motion, without pulling the ear. It is most helpful to sit next to the dog facing the same direction he is, in a comfortable position, not leaning or looming over him. Place one hand lightly on the dog to stabilize the head as you begin stroking an ear with the other hand. Starting at the base of the ear, lightly stroke the ear moving the skin of the ear between your thumb and fingers out to the ear tip. Repeat, using several strokes to cover the entire surface of the ear. Stroke in the direction that the ear lies or sets naturally. If the dog moves away, repeat with less pressure until you find the amount that your dog will not just tolerate, but enjoy. Sometimes even a few slides on each ear can be a great benefit and, go a long way toward getting handlers and their dogs more connected to each other.

There are over 200 acupressure points in and around the dog's ear that govern every system in the body including the systems responsible for digestion, respiration, reproduction, body temperature and circulation.⁴ So it shouldn't be a surprise that earwork can have wide-ranging benefits, including regulating respiration and heart rate, as well as increasing diges-



tive activity and appetite. Best of all, you don't need specific knowledge of where the points are located. You simply work the entire ear surface and observe the results.

I suggest that handlers do earwork during any downtime: just prior to the start of class as they are getting settled, in between exercises as the instructor is talking, when they are waiting their turn, or at the start line during practices or trails for Rally or agility. It can also be done at any time that the dog seems anxious, such as on a visit to the vet or before a car ride if the dog gets carsick.

Case Study 1: Gatsby

Gatsby was a young adult Cavalier that was easily agitated and overly aroused in group training classes, mainly in the presence of other dogs. He would move around constantly, barking and staring at the other dogs, and paying little attention to his handler Sheila. He would also refuse any type of food reward. Refusing food can be one of the first signs of stress, and it makes lure reward training a challenge. When I see dogs like Gatsby that are so overly aroused and agi-

tated that they refuse food, I immediately show the handler earwork.

In many instances, earwork was effective in getting Gatsby to slow down his movements and calm himself, reducing his overall reactivity. Importantly, earwork also stimulated his interest in food so he would work for it eagerly during training sessions. Sheila would often bring rawhide chews so that Gatsby could occupy himself in between exercises. He showed little interest in them until Sheila began earwork. The effect of TTouch on Gatsby was often quite dramatic. One moment, he would be highly aroused, staring and barking. After just a few strokes of earwork, he would quietly lie down and chew on his rawhide, much less concerned with his environment.

You can see a video excerpt of Gatsby and the effects of earwork at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwgEHvCGhS8>.

Additionally, TTouch and earwork serve a number of functions in puppy classes. I recommend earwork between play and socialization sessions to bring the puppies' excitement levels down. Even the most aroused puppy will generally begin to calm with a few earwork strokes. Earwork is also very useful as a lead-in to other touches and puppy handling exercises. We begin with a non-invasive TTouch, such as earwork, and move to TTouches on other areas of the body to help puppies learn touch acceptance without triggering fear responses. This is an easy way to get the entire family, particularly children, involved in gently handling the puppy. Beyond puppy classes, TTouch is also ideal for helping puppies relax in new situations during the critical socialization periods.

You can see a video excerpt of earwork used in Puppy Class at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOnjxba3cn8>.

Another simple touch that I introduce to my classes is a stroke down the entire body. This is a long connecting stroke from head to tail that can release body tension as well as creating body awareness.

Starting at the dog's head and moving to the tail, use both hands in long strokes in the direction that the hair grows. Cover as much of the body as you can in several strokes, including the tail, legs, and feet.

Case Study 2: Lucy

Lucy was a young adult shepherd mix that was very cautious when approached by people. She was brought to classes as a way to help build confidence and comfort. When people approached, Lucy would tense her body, tuck her tail, and physically hide behind her handler Cathy. At first, Cathy often noticed that Lucy could only tolerate minimal handling, particularly around her hindquarters, perhaps due to the increased level of tension in her body. By helping Lucy adjust her posture and release tension in the hindquarters and tail, she could become more physically comfortable and better able to build confidence around people.

In between class exercises, Cathy used her hands to stroke Lucy's body, down her back, down each leg and down her tail, to help her relax and release tension. Often after a few strokes, Lucy would stretch, yawn, and then approach people on her own with a relaxed posture and loose tail.

You can see a video excerpt of Lucy at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhgVpDjYFMg>.

Using TTouch bodywork has been the easiest and most effective technique to increase comfort and confidence, and therefore success, in my dog training classes. There are many other TTouches that can be easily learned and shared with clients and classrooms. Linda Tellington-Jones offers several books and videos available at www.ttouch.com that detail different touches and other facets of the TTouch Method in the books *Getting in TTouch with Your Dog* and *Getting in TTouch with Your Puppy* as well as the DVD *Unleash Your Dog's Potential*. There is also a TTouch channel on YouTube that has many useful demos. It is at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/TellingtonTTouch>.