

House Training Basics

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It is time to get rid of the fear and issues associated with housetraining puppies and even adult dogs. In actuality, if done well, housetraining is easy. However, to housetrain well, it requires commitment and dedication from the owner. If the owner cannot make the effort to properly work with the pup or dog, then woe to the carpets. The vast majority of housetraining problems have nothing to do with the age or breed of dog but with how well the human understands housetraining. Here are a few tips to help better your chances of a successfully housetrained dog.

BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF HOUSETRAINING: Let us look at how dogs learn and eventually housetrain. (1) Dogs do not learn by concepts as humans do, rather, dogs learn through building up of habits through experiences and repetition. Therefore, the ability of someone to be around with many opportunities to build the desired habits through repetition is a crucial part of successful housetraining: especially with a pup, that has limited bladder control. (2) Contrary to popular belief, dogs will soil their sleeping areas if forced to. I see many housetraining issues in pet shop pups because they are forced to tolerate being in the same close area with their waste. Many have no issues with crate soiling. Pups and dogs left too long in crates will soil and learn to tolerate it. (3) Housetraining is a series of learned behaviors by canine and human: dog acts like this, human responds, dog reacts, human responds again. Dog learns that if he acts a certain way and potties outside, he gets great things. If dog potties inside, yucky things happen. Human needs to learn the body language for the individual dog indicating he may have to go out. By building patterns of learned behaviors in human and dog, successful housetraining can begin. (4) Regressions and testing will happen, are normal and must be dealt with immediately.

REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS: It is amazing how many people feel a 12-week-old pup should be able to reliably signal when he has to go out as well as hold for ten to twelve hours. This is not reasonable at all. A pup may be 12 – 14 weeks before he even begins to grasp the habit of signaling us. Young pups need many opportunities to learn and develop patterns we desire. If you have a young pup, your schedule must be adapted to allow for potty times every few hours during the waking day. If you cannot do this, consider getting help, using a doggie day care, a dog walker, etc. If not, housetraining will be difficult, as the pup never gets ample chance to develop the desired habits we want. Older dogs can hold longer but still need adequate opportunity to learn the desired habits and behaviors. Asking an adult dog to hold 8 – 12 hours while we work (and include commuting time here) is not fair and can lead to issues with both housetraining problems as well as other problems due to physical and behavioral needs not being met.

HOUSETRAINING IS A TWO-WAY STREET: We need to learn how our pup or dog reacts when he feels the need to go. Pup or dog needs to learn that when they do A

behavior, they get A response from us (hopefully a successful outside potty). When they are caught doing B behavior (house soiling) they will get B response (unhappy human). Canines have as much to learn about us as we do about them.

LESS CRATE MORE SUPERVISION: Old school housetraining was crate pup or dog unless he was out to potty. Think, this just teaches NOT to potty in the crate and does nothing to teach desired habits in the rest of the house. Therefore, crate ONLY for when you are not home or awake to supervise pup (and please, use the crate if you are not in a position to watch the pup or dog even if home, like when you are in the bathroom). The rest of the time, the critter should be either tethered to you with a leash or confined to the same room (and not able to get out of sight) with you.

GRADUAL FREEDOMS: When the pup or dog has learned how to signal you reliably and you have learned how to respond, allow freedom of TWO rooms. The more freedom allowed, the harder it is for the dog. He has to come find you in order to signal you and this can be tough to figure out. Too much too soon before the dog has the desired habits developed for one region can lead to inappropriate elimination. If there are slip-ups, you are giving too much freedom too fast. As your friend learns to come find you reliably, add a room and eventually different levels of the house. Many owners set pups up to fail by allowing full house freedoms when the pup or even adult dog is just not ready for it. Then we get angry when the pup or dog potties all over.

SCHEDULE: Feed the pup or dog on a regular schedule. Leaving food down all day makes this far more difficult as well as can lead to other issues. Young pups up to about six months of age need three meals a day (small breeds may require four due to the risk of hypoglycemia). At five to six months of age, begin phasing out the middle meal and increase the other meals as needed to maintain optimal body weight (or decrease if dog is too chubby). "Free feeding" (leaving a bowl of food down all the time) can affect the physical schedule of the dog and he may have to go at times where you are not there to assist him. If this happens, even the most reliably trained dog may be forced to go where he should not.

IMMEDIATE DISCIPLINE: Punishing pup or dog after the fact is a lost effort. In a dog's mind, punishment is for the action it is doing at the time the punishment happens. Therefore, finding a mess, dragging the dog to it and punishing is not fair to the dog and can result eventually in other behavioral issues starting. You MUST catch pup or dog in the act for an effective correction. Now, do NOT go overboard. Humans tend to go way overboard, scream, yell, hit, shove muzzle in the puddle or pile, not fair, too much. A fast, quick, sharp verbal intervention is often more than enough. Then shut off the anger and become positive while heading outside to finish. Dogs learn more effectively when the desired behavior is up-played.

OBSERVE YOUR DOG: Look for signals that Sparky needs to go out: sniffing around the ground, circling, etc. When you see him start this, say a sharp "AAAAH! NO" to stop the action and then say in a happy tone some thing like "Want to go out?" Take Puppy outside immediately to his potty area and encourage him to go. I use "Go Kennel!" You

can use "Get Busy", "Go Potty" or whatever you like - just use the same command each time and praise as soon as the action happens. My dogs will stand by the door to signal they have to go out. I know people who have taught dogs to ring bells hanging from the doorknob.

BOREDOM AND FUN: When you take your dog out to go, at first keep him on a leash for better control and ability to manage what he does (even if your yard is fenced.) Give your potty cue and allow three to five minutes, if there is success, leash comes off (if your yard is unfenced, do not do this, safety is needed). Now there is some fun playtime. If there is no success, back inside, life is boring, dog is kept close to you and then try again in a few minutes or if the signaling starts again. Once there is success, **BIG PLAY.**

TEACH WHAT YOU WANT FROM THE START: I am against paper training or using those special pads that "encourage" puppy to go potty on them. This teaches puppy it is fine to potty in the house. Now you want to teach him he cannot do something once acceptable. It is confusing. Unless you are disabled or for some reason **MUST** paper train, I encourage people to avoid it. I have known Chihuahua owners in New England that have successfully housetrained pups in the winter without ever having to paper train.

REGRESSIONS: Changes in a dog's life or environment can and often do cause regressions in many behaviors: housetraining is often one of them. The environmental changes can be as subtle as a new neighbor a couple houses down with a new dog to as obvious as moving to a new house, new pet/child/roommate, etc. If the dog regresses and it is not medical, you need to regress as well and re-housetrain.

OTHER CONCERNS: Bear in mind that should a reliably housebroken puppy or dog begin having accidents, this may indicate an underlying physical reason such as a bladder infection. Should this not be the case, there could be a behavioral issue such as submission urination or stress. Should you start having problems with a dog not prone to problems, seek medical assistance first while looking for external triggers for the regression. In addition, as a dog ages, accidents may happen. Accidents may happen with fully trained dogs. Dogs not neutered or spayed have a higher incidence of eliminating in the house as well. Scent marking is just another form of undesired elimination and can be managed by neutering and refreshing housetraining.

The vast majority of housetraining issues in puppies and adult dogs trace right back to the owners. By understanding how dogs housetrain, learning effective methods of housetraining, teaching what we want from the start, having reasonable expectations and being clear in our expectations, there is little reason why the average dog in the average house cannot successfully learn good potty manners.