

Housetraining a Dog

By Dr. Karen Becker

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker. A significant percentage of dogs wind up in animal shelters due to housetraining problems. Actually about a quarter of behavior-related visits to veterinarians also involve housetraining issues.

In my experience, one of the main reasons housetraining fails [is] because dog parents have a tendency to look at their canine companions as four-legged humans and view accidents on the floor the same way that they would view a person who has just relieved themselves on the floor, which actually has no correlation. But we tend to do that, we humanize our pets.

While your dog is a member of your family, of course he is not a person. If you mishandle potty mistakes in the house, you'll actually, most of the time, create the opposite effect of what you're going after, which means you make the situation worse.

Elimination is, of course, a very natural part of your dog's or cat's function. New puppies, actually in particular, can be expected to relieve themselves whenever and wherever they want to because that's just what happens.

This actually is a natural biologic function of them just peeing and pooping wherever they want, until they are old enough to control that urge physiologically, which means they have control of their external urethral sphincter and, number 2, when they're appropriately motivated to pee and poo outside. Both of those factors have to be in place before puppies are capable of becoming housetrained.

Now, the good news is it's very possible – and actually many, many people do it, successful positive pet parents. You absolutely can train your puppy or adult dog to become housetrained at any age. Teaching good potty habits to a puppy is much easier than training or re-training an adult dog, but either is possible, and either can absolutely be accomplished. If you adopt an adult dog who has not been housetrained, don't fear. You're 100 percent capable of completing the task.

There are three things that will ensure a successful housetraining experience for your dog. I can't stress the importance enough of positivity, consistency and patience. All three are really important.

Prime Time for Housetraining Puppies

The age at which most puppies can begin to learn their appropriate potty etiquette is about eight and a half weeks. Younger puppies actually don't have the neurological development necessary to control elimination, much like human infants.

Puppies under about eight weeks of age simply don't have control over their bladder. They simply can't hold their urine in. It just naturally will come out. If you have a really young puppy, that's not going to be a possibility. But by eight and a half weeks, potty breaking or housetraining is absolutely accomplishable.

It is important that you try and have an outdoor grassy surface – that's the best approach – and that you consistently take your puppy to that spot for elimination. Your puppy's brain is developed enough at that age to begin to associate the smell and surface of his potty training spot and the act of elimination. They can correlate the two.

Not only can most puppies at eight and a half weeks start to make the mental connection, but they're actually quite capable of recognizing that they feel better when they relieve themselves there.

Housetraining your puppy is a two-fold process. First, she must learn to go to the designated spot, and then she must learn to hold her urine and feces until she's in that spot.

A young puppy needs to be taken to her potty spot about every hour, and after eating, playing and sleeping. You have to be able to watch your puppy's behavior and know that it's time for them to relieve themselves. The older she gets, the less often she'll need to go to her potty spot. But no dog should be expected to last eight or 10 hours without a potty break, especially not a puppy.

Four Housetraining Ground Rules

In my experience, there are four basic ground rules for housetraining any dog.

Housetraining ground rule number 1, never leave your un-housetrained dog unattended. Not even for a minute. If you aren't actively engaged with your dog, having her in the same room as you doesn't count if you're not focused on her. It's very important to not give her the opportunity to fail at housetraining.

If you can't engage with your dog, which of course isn't possible every minute of every day, then she should be in her crate. Yes, I said crate.

Some pet parents believe that crates are really bad or negative, but honestly, nothing could be further from the truth. A crate is actually a very natural, normal habitat for a dog, as long as

your puppy doesn't associate it with a punishment. You never put your dog in the crate when they've been bad.

Dogs are den dwellers by nature. Under normal circumstances, they will enjoy and actually seek out a small, safe, warm "bedroom" in which to rest. If you can provide your pup with his own little den in the form of a crate, then there's really nothing to fear. As long as you're not using forceful or any type of punishment associated with his den or nest, he'll actually fall in love with it. My dogs – the crate doors are always open – my dogs love taking their naps in their crate, which is exactly the experience that I intended to create for them.

A dog crate has a lot of uses for both you and your pet, with housetraining, of course, at the top of the list. Nature has arranged it that a small, enclosed area will help your puppy learn conscious control of his urge to eliminate.

In the wild, mother wolves teach their litters to potty outside the den. If you provide your puppy with his own den, you're working in harmony with his natural desire to not soil it.

Other uses for crates include keeping your pet safe from a long list of dangers and potential disasters – everything from electrical cords to cat food bowls, to potentially if you've got visitors or company over. Those are all great times for the puppy to naturally go into his den and have a little timeout.

If you're absolutely dead set against crate-training your un-housetrained dog, then the only other option you have is to tether your dog to you so that no matter where you go, your dog is right there beside you. The way to do this is to put a clip on the leash, then put the leash around your waist; or you clip your dog, you tether your dog to your belt buckle at all times. Obviously, this arrangement wouldn't be practical for many of you, which is why I recommend that you consider using the crate.

Housetraining rule number 2 is to feed your dog on a schedule. I never recommend that you just leave a bowl of food out for your dog or your puppy, because as your dog eats and nibbles, you're not able to time exactly when feces are going to happen. If you're feeding your dog or puppy on a once-, twice- or three-times-a-day schedule depending on your puppy's or adult dog's age, then you're able to know that within 30 minutes to an hour later, they're going to have a bowel movement and you can plan for that.

The easiest routine for most people is to feed their dog twice a day. The only time I don't recommend twice-a-day feeding for puppies is if your puppy is under three pounds of body weight. You're going to feed your dogs in the morning and then again at night.

For most dogs, about an hour after breakfast and an hour after dinner, they're going to need to go outside and go poo. It's important that someone in the house is watching and waiting and ready for that to happen.

Feeding your dog on a schedule makes potty breaks much more predictable and actually allows you to exercise more control over the situation. The more opportunities you give your pup to succeed in relieving himself outside, the faster housetraining will occur.

Housetraining ground rule number 3 is reward your dog for good behavior. In order to successfully potty train your dog, it's crucial that you reward her for good behavior, and that you praise her in a way that she understands. Its timing is also really important in there.

She will absolutely pick up cues from the tone of your voice. If you're saying things like "Good girl," "That's what I'm looking for," "Nice job," in a quiet, loving, calming tone immediately after she performs the good deed, you're reinforcing that behavior.

Almost all dogs speak the language of love, which for them is food. Offering a treat within one to three seconds after peeing or pooing in the appropriate spot has happened is another great way to reinforce this behavior.

After a short time of offering small morsels of food immediately after your dog has gone potty in the appropriate spot, it won't take dogs very long to recognize that that is what you're looking for and there's a super great reward at the end of that. You'll see puppies actually get really excited that they did a good job. That's when you can begin backing off of the number of rewards that you're giving them. Sometimes you will offer a treat and sometimes you'll just offer verbal praise. "Good job" and a pat and you can celebrate that.

It's interesting, usually you only have to use food rewards for a very short period of time before puppies and adult dogs respond to praise alone after a successful urination or defecation in the appropriate spot. Once your dog is fully housetrained, you can completely eliminate the need for food or treats if you wish, and just offer verbal commands of being happy and celebrating her good deed outside.

Housetraining ground rule number 4 is don't punish your dog for making mistakes. For many people, this can be the most difficult rule to follow, but I can't stress how important this point is. Of course it's frustrating when your four-legged family member just doesn't seem to cooperate or looks like maybe they're intentionally making a bad decision. But in order to successfully housetrain your pup, you have to avoid punishing any type of mistake. Mistakes are going to happen. No shouting, absolutely no physical contact. Never rub your dog's nose in it or make any type of scary sound if your dog or puppy makes a mistake.

Oftentimes in the morning with smaller dogs or puppies, you'll find that they'll go outside and pee. But as their bladder is developing, they don't realize that there's still urine left in their bladder, so 10 minutes after they've gone potty outside, they come back in and pee again – wildly frustrating. If that's happening to you, then be smarter than your puppy and take him or her out in the morning and then five minutes later, take her back out again to relieve the remaining part of the urine in her bladder so that she has a successful morning housetraining session.

It's really important to take into your account your attitude towards your puppy when it comes to failures. First of all, don't give your dog or puppy a chance to fail. But when they do, recognize that your response to that failure is really important. If you're yelling or using a harsh tone or if you are at all responding negatively, you're actually teaching your puppy to fear you and fear this response. What will happen is your puppy will go into another room to potty, versus just developing that trust relationship with you that eventually will lead to him or her letting you know that they have to go outside.

Dogs obviously know when you're upset at them, but they also don't know exactly why, which actually leads to a lot of feelings of confusion and also fear in dogs. From your dog's point of view, you're the center of her universe. It's really important that as a loving pack leader, you are role-modeling trust as the foundational emotion in your relationship.

Even if you catch your pup in the actual act of relieving himself indoors, make sure you're not responding in fear or force. What will happen in that situation is your puppy will connect his elimination with your anger and then he just becomes more sneaky about elimination. He'll just go behind the couch or he'll wait until you've turned your head before he does it. It's important that every situation pertaining to housetraining is very positive.

The most important thing to remember is by the time your dog is relieving himself on the floor, you've actually missed that opportunity to make a successful experience. Your timing of making sure you're doing your part in coordinating outdoor potty breaks is the most important aspect of housetraining.

Using Verbal Cues for Potty Training

When it's time for your dog's morning break, grab some treats, put her on the leash and bring her to your specific outdoor potty spot. Give her about five minutes to do her business. During that time, she's on the leash – it's interesting – you'll see her just look at you and you'll look at her. Initially, she'll wonder, "Why are we out here? What's going on?" But eventually, because she has to pee or poo, she will actually go potty.

When she begins to urinate or defecate, that's when you begin verbal praise. You basically ignore her until she starts urinating or defecating. Then you let her know, "That's a good girl." That's what we're looking for.

I recommend that you use a verbal cue that she can begin correlating to the act of urination and defecation, which is also going to help her recognize that that's the act that you're looking for.

Don't make the mistake that if your puppy doesn't relieve herself the minute that you bring her outside that she doesn't have to go. That's very important. You know biologically that if your puppy's been in the crate for seven hours all night, she probably has made some urine, and probably feces as well. If she's playing or squirrely or is absolutely not interested in pottying outside, then bring her back in. Put her back in the crate and try again five or 10 minutes later.

Ideally, you'll be able to take your puppy to the potty spot, use the cue "Go pee," or "Go poo," or "Go potty," whatever your cue word is, and then of course use your words initially, but the goal is after your verbal cue, your puppy will perform the blessed, beautiful act of being housetrained and then you celebrate together.

If you have a fenced yard and you know that your backyard environment is safe, a lot of pet owners are just interested in letting their puppy out to do their thing outside. I don't recommend that initially for two reasons.

One, it's important that you monitor your puppy's urine and feces. It's important that you're watching to make sure that the puppy isn't having diarrhea. You want to make sure that they're not getting into things like bark, rocks or sticks when they're really, really young.

But also, that doesn't give you the opportunity to cue or mark that potty behavior, and that can really be valuable later on when you're interested in communicating to your dog, "I need you to go potty right now." That's something you want to set up early on.

If you can spend the couple of months with your puppy on a leash, even if you have a fenced-in backyard, that's going to give you the boundaries and the verbal cues that your puppy needs to be able to communicate later on in life that you're interested in having them go pee or poo right now even if they're off leash.

Certain dogs and certain breeds seem to understand from a very young age to do their business outside. Actually, some breeds just don't. I absolutely have seen some breeds just take longer to housebreak. I have had some people say to me, "I've heard that certain breeds can't be housetrained." It's not true. It just takes certain breeds and sometimes certain puppies with

slower cognitive development a little bit longer to understand the ground rules of housetraining.

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