

The Worst Housetraining Mistakes Dog Owners Make

Housetraining problems rank high as a reason for dogs to be surrendered to animal shelters, as well as visits to veterinarians. In my experience, it's often due to dog parents viewing their pets as furry humans. Here are my four basic ground rules for housetraining any dog, young or old.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Housetraining issues are behind many dog relinquishments to animal shelters, as well as many behavior-related visits to veterinarians
- The ideal time to start housetraining a puppy is between 7 to 8.5 weeks, but any dog of any age can be housetrained if their human is consistent, positive, and patient
- There are 4 ground rules for housetraining: #1 — never leave an un-housetrained dog unsupervised, even for a second; #2 — feed on a consistent daily schedule (no free-feeding); #3 — reward your dog for good behavior; #4 — do not punish mistakes
- It's a good idea to establish verbal cues during housetraining so that no matter where you are, you can give your dog the cue to relieve himself

Sadly, many dogs are surrendered to animal shelters due to housetraining problems, and a substantial number of behavior-related visits to veterinarians involve the same issue.

In my experience, one of the main reasons housetraining fails is because dog parents tend to view their canine family members as furry humans. They react to pet accidents on the floor the same way they would react if a person left the mess. While it's true that dogs are members of the family, they aren't human, and when potty mistakes in the house are mishandled, very often the result is the opposite of what was desired, and a bad situation gets progressively worse.

Elimination is a natural function, and **new puppies** in particular can be expected to relieve themselves whenever and wherever the urge strikes until they are 1) old enough to control the urge physiologically, and 2) appropriately motivated to pee and poop outdoors. Both factors must be in play before puppies can be successfully housetrained.

The good news is that it's entirely possible to successfully housetrain a dog at any age. Teaching good potty habits to a puppy is much easier than training or re-training an adult dog, but it's far from impossible.

There are three things that will improve the likelihood of success in housetraining your dog, and I can't stress the importance of them enough. They are consistency, positive reinforcement, and patience.

The Best Time to Housetrain Puppies

The optimal time to begin housetraining your puppy is the day she or he comes home. However, it's important to remember that like human infants, younger puppies don't have the neurological development necessary to regulate elimination. They aren't yet able to control their bladder or hold urine in.

If you purchased or rescued your puppy through an organization or breeder that wisely uses early puppy socialization programs that build cognition and social experiences from four to eight weeks of age, your pup may already be partially housetrained. Be sure to ask the rescue or breeder about instituting one of these invaluable early learning programs prior to bringing your puppy home.

The first step is to find an outdoor grassy space you can consistently take your puppy to when it's potty time. His brain is developed enough at about 8.5 weeks to begin to associate the smell and surface of his potty spot and the act of elimination. Not only can most puppies at 8.5 weeks start to make these important mental connections, but they are also better able to control when and where they relieve themselves.

Housetraining your puppy is a two-phase process. First, he must learn to relieve himself in the designated spot, and then he must learn to hold his urine and feces until he's in that spot.

A young puppy needs to be taken to his potty spot about every hour, and always after eating, playing, and sleeping. It's also important to watch his behavior and learn his "I gotta go" signals. The older he gets, the less often he'll need to go. But no dog should be expected to last 8 or 10 hours without a potty break, especially a puppy.

4 Housetraining Ground Rules

In my experience, there are 4 basic ground rules for housetraining any dog.

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 with you doesn't count. It's very important not to give her opportunities to fail at housetraining. When you can't engage with your dog, which of course isn't possible every minute of every day, she should be in her crate.

Some pet parents believe crates are bad or negative, but honestly, nothing could be further from the truth. A crate is a very natural, normal habitat for a dog, providing your pup doesn't associate it with punishment. You should never put your dog in a crate as punishment.

Dogs are den dwellers by nature. Under normal circumstances, they enjoy and seek out small, safe, warm spaces in which to rest. If you provide your pup with her own little den in the form of a crate, and there's nothing forceful or punishing about her association with it, she'll learn to love it.

I've always left the doors open on my dogs' crates and they love taking naps in there, which is exactly the experience I want to create for them. A dog crate has a lot of uses for both you and your pet, with housetraining at the top of the list.

Nature has arranged it such that a small, enclosed area will help your puppy learn conscious control of her urge to eliminate. In the wild, mother wolves teach their litters to potty outside the den. If you provide your puppy with her own den, you're working in harmony with her natural desire not to soil it.

Other uses for a crate include keeping your pet safe from a long list of dangers and potential disasters — everything from electrical cords to the cat's food bowl to houseguests with small children.

If you're dead set against crate-training your un-housetrained dog, then your only other option is to tether her to you so no matter where you go, she's right there beside you.

The way to do this is to put a clip on a short leash (no longer than 4 feet), put the leash on your dog, and clip it to your clothing or belt. Obviously, this arrangement wouldn't be practical for many of you, which is why I recommend embracing the use of a crate.

2. **Feed your dog on a schedule** — If you always leave a bowl of food available for your un-housetrained dog to nibble at, he'll nibble all day and he'll need to poop at entirely unpredictable times. It will be just about impossible to figure out the best time to take him outside to relieve himself. I don't recommend the all-day-buffet method of feeding pets under any circumstances, but it's an especially bad idea with a dog that isn't housetrained.

If you're feeding your dog or puppy on a consistent once-, twice- or three-times-a-day schedule (depending on his age), you know that within 30 minutes to an hour after eating, he'll need to go potty. It's important that someone in the household is ready and willing at those times to take the dog out.

Feeding your dog on a schedule makes potty breaks much more predictable and allows you to exercise more control over the situation. The more opportunities you give your pup to succeed in relieving himself outside, the faster he'll be housetrained.

3. **Reward your dog for good behavior** — In order to successfully potty train your dog, it's crucial that you reward for good behavior, and praise her in ways she understands. Timing is also very important here. Your dog will 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, calm tone immediately after she goes, you're reinforcing that behavior.

Almost all dogs speak the language of food, so **treats** are also a good reward during the housetraining process. When your dog eliminates in the right spot outside, praise her with words and give her a treat within 1 to 3 seconds of the behavior. Remember that consistency is crucial, so make sure you have treats with you to reward her within 3 seconds every time she goes in the right spot.

After a short time, she'll recognize that she makes you happy when she eliminates outdoors, and in return she receives a reward. You want to reinforce that good behavior every time it happens, and there's no better reward in the beginning than food treats.

Food rewards are typically only necessary for a short time before both puppies and adult dogs respond to praise alone. Once your dog is fully housetrained, you can completely eliminate the need for treats if you wish, and offer just **verbal praise** instead.

4. **Don't punish your dog for mistakes** — No shouting, absolutely no physical contact, and never, ever rub your dog's nose in his mess. For many people, this can be the most difficult rule to follow, but I can't stress enough how important it is.

Of course, it's frustrating when your four-legged family member just doesn't seem to want to get with the

program. But to successfully houstrain your pup, you must avoid punishing any type of mistake. And mistakes are going to happen. For example, sometimes first thing in the morning puppies will dutifully pee outside, but because their bladders are still developing, they don't realize there's still urine in there, and 10 minutes after they've done their business outside, they finish the job inside.

If this is happening to you, you must be smarter than your puppy. Take him out in the morning and then five minutes later take him back out again to get rid of the rest of the urine in his bladder.

It's important to adjust your attitude toward your dog when it comes to houstraining mistakes. First, don't give him a chance to fail. But when he does, recognize that your response sets the stage for everything that happens after. If you respond negatively, you teach your puppy to fear you.

There's a good chance he'll respond in the future by going into another room out of your line of sight to potty, rather than learning to trust you and tell you when he needs to go outside.

Your dog will know you're upset at him, but he won't know why. He'll feel confused, and scared. From your dog's point of view, you're the center of his universe. It's really important that you role model trust as the foundational emotion in your **relationship**.

Even if you catch your pup in the act of relieving himself indoors, make sure you don't respond with anger or force. What can happen in that case is he'll connect you seeing him eliminate with your anger, and he may get sneaky about it.

It's important that every situation pertaining to houstraining is very positive. In short, you can't punish or frighten a dog into appropriate behavior.

The important thing to remember is by the time your dog is relieving himself on your floor, your opportunity for a successful potty break outside has passed. Ensuring you're doing your part in helping your dog succeed is the most vital aspect of houstraining.

Establishing Verbal Cues

When it's time for your dog's morning potty break, grab some treats, put her on her leash, and bring her to a specific spot each time. Give her about 5 minutes to do her business. That's usually enough time for her to sniff around and decide to go. If you take her to her spot and she does everything *but* relieve herself, it's a good sign she's not going to do her business this trip.

What you want to do in this case is bring her right back to her crate (or another confined space) and close the door to prevent her from roaming loose in your house with a full bladder and colon. That's a set up for her to fail, and the goal of houstraining is success, not failure.

In 10 or 15 minutes, treats in hand, take her back outside to her spot and let her try again. You shouldn't have to repeat this more than once before your pup really needs to go and will, but be prepared just in case to go back and forth to the potty spot a few times.

Don't make the mistake of assuming if she doesn't relieve herself when you take her out the first time that she doesn't need to go. She definitely needs to go, especially first thing in the morning. She should either be in her crate or outside in her potty spot until she has done her morning business.

When she goes, mark her behavior with a verbal cue. For example, the second your dog begins to pee, say "go potty" in a low, reassuring tone. This marks the behavior you want. What you're doing is associating in your dog's mind the words "go potty" with the act of relieving herself. "Go poo" or some other short phrase is a good verbal cue for pooping.

Eventually, you'll be able to take your dog to a spot — ideally any spot of your choosing whether at home or elsewhere — and give the verbal cue you've chosen and as if by magic, she'll deliver! Within 3 seconds of your pup finishing her business, you must give her a treat and say, "good job."

Give her a couple more treats and continue to praise her before you go back inside. Don't wait until you're back inside to give your dog a treat, because you'll teach her to associate coming back indoors with treats rather than relieving herself outside.

That's why it's critically important that you remember the treats when you take her outside, and then reward her within 3 seconds after she completes the desired behavior.

If You Have a Fenced Yard

If you have a fenced and safe backyard, you can simply let your pup out on his own to relieve himself. However, I don't recommend you do this at the beginning.

Number one, it's important to monitor your puppy's "output," his **poop** in particular, to check for signs of diarrhea or ingestion of non-food items like tree bark, rocks, or sticks. Puppies do like to chew, as we know. Number two, it's impossible to establish a verbal "go potty" cue if you're inside and he's outside. And finally, you can't give him a food reward within 3 seconds if you're in different places.

Certain dogs and certain breeds seem to understand from a very young age to do their business outside. Other dogs don't pick it up so quickly and take longer to houstrain. But there is no breed or type of dog that absolutely cannot be houstrained. It just takes certain breeds and sometimes certain puppies with slower cognitive development a bit longer to understand the ground rules of houstraining.
