

Housebreaking Your Puppy

By Steve Robinson

One of the most essential, and often most frustrating, tasks associated with a new puppy or dog is housebreaking. If done with a little advance planning, it can be accomplished in a very short period of time. If attempted without forethought, your dog may never be completely reliable.

There are three basic principles to keep in mind when training a new puppy or an older dog to eliminate outside:

1. Try not to let the dog make a mistake.
2. Always reward the dog for desirable behavior.
3. If a mistake is made, correct, don't punish.

Let's take this one at a time.

Try Not to Let the Dog Make a Mistake.

First, dogs are creatures of habit. If they get away with eliminating in the house, they will quickly learn that it is okay to do so. The key here is to never let them think it's ok by not letting them make a mistake. It's much harder to unlearn an unwanted behavior than to teach a proper one.

How can you prevent the dog from making a mistake? Your first line of defense is to constantly monitor your pup's behavior whenever it is in a position to have an "accident". First, you must try to anticipate when it will need to eliminate. The most common occurrences are:

1. when waking up
2. a short time after eating (may vary from immediately to 1/2 hour),
3. after a play session or other period of activity, and
4. when in an excited state, such as greeting returning owners or visitors.

Watch Your Dog!

You must learn never to let the pup out of sight while it is loose in the house. First, confine the pup to the room you are in with a barrier, such as a baby gate. Next, keep a close watch; most dogs engage in a ritualistic, identifiable pattern of behavior just before they eliminate. This may include circling and sniffing, a short burst of hyperactivity, or other repetitive action. A bit of observation on your part will help you recognize your pup's particular pattern so that you can quickly move the dog outdoors at the appropriate time. When you can't watch your dog, place it in a confined space, such as a crate.

Set a Routine—And Stick To It.

The tendency of dogs to habituate their behavior can help you to minimize mistakes in another way. Just as our digestive systems become "regular" when we keep the same schedule every day, so will a dog's system adjust to a schedule if kept constant. For the first month of your pup's life in its new home, you can greatly enhance its (and your!) chance of success by waking, feeding, walking and retiring your pup at approximately the same time each day and night.

If all this makes sense to you so far, then let's try to tackle the next obstacle. How do you keep the pup from making a mistake when you cannot watch it?

Controlled Confinement

The single most useful item for housebreaking your pup is the dog crate. Dogs are inherently clean animals. Even wild canids, such as wolves, will leave their den to eliminate as soon as they are old enough to do so. Most dogs will likewise avoid fouling their own nest. While a substantial difference exists from dog to dog, a crated puppy approximately 10-12 weeks old in good health should be able to hold its urine while sleeping for approximately 4-8 hours (the time will be less during the day when the dog is awake). Withdrawing water approximately two hours before bedtime and keeping the puppy calm should help this process along. [Note: If your pup is on medication, consult your veterinarian before withdrawing water.]

If the pup does wake up whining in the middle of the night, it's probably telling you that it wants (needs) out. Oblige it immediately. The same, of course, holds true during or after nap times during the day, when the pup will probably have to urinate more frequently.

The crate will also serve to instill a sense of discipline into your pup's life. If introduced properly, the pup will not perceive the crate as punishment, nor should you use it that way. The crate becomes a sanctuary (den) for the pup as well as a means of confining it when it cannot be watched. Do not go on a guilt trip about denying your pup its "freedom". Think of it this way: Is it better to allow the pup to make frequent mistakes, including house soiling, chewing, etc. thereby creating stress for all who are concerned, or for the pup to learn that freedom is a privilege rather than a right?

What to Buy

The best kind of crate to purchase is one made of wire and open on all sides. The gauge of the wire should be strong enough to hold your dog as it gets older, and the spacing of the wires should be close enough so that the dog cannot place its head or paws through the openings. Plastic or fiberglass crates are not recommended for home use. They are designed primarily for shipping and are much more confining. They also are not as well ventilated and may become too warm over long periods of use.

Also, make sure the crate will be adequately sized for your dog when it is full-grown. This will give you a great deal more versatility later on and also provide a means of transporting your dog in a car or truck in a safe and controlled manner.

Introducing the Crate

The easiest way to introduce a new pup to its crate is at bedtime. Most young puppies are worn out by the end of the day and will be ready to sleep when the lights are turned out. Be sure to walk your pup right before you retire. Place the pup in the crate, making sure there is a pan on the bottom, and place the crate beside your bed.

If needed, you can place an object in the crate that is heavily scented with your smell—such as an old shirt, a pair of jeans or a small towel. A small teddy bear or other stuffed animal may also give the pup something to snuggle up to. Do not make the object too large, however, as this may induce the dog to utilize the object to absorb its urine, thereby escaping its own mess. Dog 'beds', throw rugs, or carpet scraps in the crate are usually counterproductive. If the pup does urinate on an object in the crate, remove it and all other absorbent materials.

If the pup resists the crate or you are introducing an older dog to a crate for the first time, you can help it become adjusted by creating a positive association. Start by feeding in front of an open crate, then just inside the door, and finally, inside the crate itself. Always leave the door of the crate open when the dog is not inside as an enticement to return to its "den" when tired.

If, as suggested, you have purchased a crate that is adequately sized for your dog as an adult, it will be necessary to block off a portion of it for house training purposes. The purpose of this important step is to ensure that the pup is not able to eliminate at one end of the crate and escape to the other. Leave just enough room for it to turn around and lie down comfortably. As the pup grows, you can expand the area of the crate available to it.

We recommend that the crate be placed beside your bed at night. Your presence will reassure the pup and help it get through the initial shock of being taken away from its littermates. You will also be able to better monitor your pup should it need to go out during the night.

During the day, the crate should be moved (or a second crate can be used) to a well-lit, well-trafficked area of the home so it feels the presence of its "pack". Do not use a basement or confining bathroom or utility room. The kitchen often works best as it is usually bright and open, has great smells, and has a tile floor for any spills or accidents. As the pup gets older, you may wish to leave it in its crate in the kitchen at night. A baby monitor can be used to hear any cues, which may indicate a need to eliminate.

The kitchen also works well as a less vulnerable spot from which to give the dog limited freedom as it gets older. This can usually be accomplished by placing a baby gate across the doorway.

The “Crying Baby” Syndrome

Once in the crate, if the pup begins to cry and whine immediately, wait it out. If you give in at this point, the pup will learn that it gets let out every time it fusses. This behavior can carry over to other aspects of future training in the form of attempted manipulation of the owner whenever a demand is placed on the dog with which it would prefer not to comply.

Be Diligent.

Give your pup every advantage to do the right thing. When you awaken in the morning, the first thing you should do is get your pup outside to eliminate. Make it almost like a reflex action. MOVE. Keep a robe, slippers, overcoat or whatever else you need at your bedside to make like Clark Kent. As you’re getting the puppy out of its crate, ask if it needs “to go potty” to start forming the association between act of elimination and a verbal cue, then whisk it out the door. Initially you want to carry the puppy from your bedroom to the back door to minimize the chance that it will stop and make a deposit on the way out. After it gets used to the routine and comfortable with a leash, this should no longer be necessary.

Finally, if you’re busy during the day, need to leave the house, or your pup’s just tuckered out (puppies, like babies, sleep a lot), put the pup back in its crate. If you remain at home you may initially want to move the crate to the general area where you’ll be—both to give the pup reassurance and to keep an eye on it so you can get it outside as soon as it awakens. Over time, however, the need for this should diminish, as your pup, in its desire not to lie in its own mess, will let you know when it’s time to go out.

When Your Puppy Is Loose

There will be frequent times during your family’s daily routine when the pup will be loose in the home. As explained earlier, an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure. To reiterate:

1. keep the puppy in sight at all times, use baby gates to confine it to areas where it can be watched.
2. watch for elimination cues.
3. use a verbal phrase to form an association (the pup’s name usually works to get its attention).
4. get the puppy outside as quickly as possible.
5. praise for desired behavior (more on this later).

Above all, it’s important that you do not wait for the puppy to have an accident. Good habits—and bad ones—are built by repetition.

Using a Leash

For convenience, many owners don’t use leashes on young puppies. Often the pup is small, can’t outrun us, and wants to fight the leads, which it finds confining. As a result, we merely encourage the pup to follow us, or carry it to a spot, and put it down.

This is a mistake. Puppies need to learn to walk on a leash, and also to relieve themselves while on a leash. The latter could be extremely important if you’re away from home or in an area where you can’t safely take your dog off the leash. There also comes a time in every dog’s life when he realizes he can outrun you. The consequences could be disastrous.

Always Reward The Dog For Desirable Behavior

Touched upon previously, this is the real secret to successful dog training. Communicating to the dog what you don’t want can be confusing and frustrating; clearly and unambiguously communicating what you do want is the true end objective.

How do you accomplish this feat? With simple and sincere praise, every time your pup eliminates outside—at least for the first few weeks. This means you must take rather than let your dog outside until it is reliably housebroken.

When you take the dog outside, make sure to take it to the same spot every time. Choose a spot away from the house, as a dog will instinctively avoid an area too close to its “den.” The smell of its own urine and excrement in that area will serve as a stimulus. This will also help the dog understand that it has been brought outside to eliminate, not to play. PRAISE, PRAISE, and PRAISE! Just as a correction indicates to the dog that it has done something wrong, praise tells it that it has done the right thing.

Try to avoid using food treats to reward elimination. The dog may begin to ask to go outside just to get a treat, or become so focused on the food that it forgets its task.

Repetition and Consistency

While many disagree on the time frame, most animal behaviorists believe that new learning takes place in a short-term context and is later transferred to the long term memory. For a task like housebreaking, this transfer, with repetitive, consistent training should take about 30 days. For this reason, it is important that your message to the dog—whether correction or reward—always be the same. Use the same tone of voice when you catch the pup having an accident, take it out through the same door to the same place in the yard, and praise the puppy the same way each time it does something to please you. Above all, be patient. Some pups learn very quickly, and others take a bit longer. But by avoiding confusion—and anger—you’ll be in a position to facilitate the process.

Poor Results

If you’ve been diligent about following the procedure outlined above and still haven’t achieved a good result, you may need to look elsewhere for the cause. Three common problems which can interfere with the task of housebreaking include an immature digestive system, a food that is not well assimilated, or a possible urinary tract infection. If you suspect any of these difficulties, it may be wise to seek council from your veterinarian. Once cleared up, you can go back to your normal housebreaking routine.

Asking to Go Out

Once a pup has learned to “hold it” in its crate and in the house, the next step is for the pup to learn to “ask” to go outside. This will take a little longer. The key components here are to:

1. Continually reinforce the connection between the phrase you select and the act of elimination,
2. make sure you use the same exit door,
3. take, don’t let, the dog out, and
4. praise the desired behavior.

While the time frame will vary, your pup will start to provide an indication that it needs to go out. This indication may take the form of standing at the exit door, running, circling, or jumping up on the door, coming to you first, perhaps barking or pawing, and then running toward the door, etc. In any event, don’t miss the golden opportunity to reinforce your dog’s response with praise. It is usually easiest to reinforce whatever signal or cue your dog presents. Trying to teach a new or specific cue can prolong the process and confuse the pup.

If a Mistake Is Made

Correction is the process of letting the pup know it has made, or is about to make, an error. If the pup does begin to eliminate in your presence, the proper way to correct is to interrupt the act with a firm “Eh!” or another non-frightening sound. Go quickly to the puppy (do not charge or frighten it), then follow the procedure outlined above to get the puppy outside to finish the process. Punishment, by contrast, is an unpleasant consequence administered after the fact. Because of the dog’s limited time perspective, punishment is not an effective training tool and can cause confusion, fear and resentment.

Correct only what you see, when you see it

When making a correction, keep in mind the fact that dogs have a very limited sense of time. For a puppy to make the connection that something it does is wrong, the correction must be either at the same time or immediately following (within a few seconds of) the undesirable act. If you miss the boat, forget it. A puppy will not connect its mistake with your astonishment if administered later. Merely clean up the mess and try to be more diligent.

In administering a correction, it is important that it be both fair and impartial. Fairness means that the harshness of your negative response be in proportion to the severity of the “crime.” A housebreaking “accident” is, in fact, no crime at all, as the dog does not yet know what is correct behavior. By definition, the dog can’t ‘misbehave’ if it does not yet know how to ‘behave.’

To be overly harsh can also create fear in a puppy. Fear, in addition to potential long-term negative effects, greatly diminishes the ability of an animal to learn.

Impartiality, on the other hand, means correcting the behavior, not the dog. It is an objective indication to the dog that its actions are not acceptable. It is not a personal statement about the animal itself. Anger will be counterproductive. Dogs, like people, have a sense of self-worth. Directing your displeasure at the pup can have a seriously detrimental effect on its self confidence and its ability to cope with stress as it gets older.

Don'ts

Do not rub your pup’s nose in its mess. It is both degrading and useless for helping the pup to make a connection with what you do or don’t want. It may also have the catastrophic effect of encouraging coprophagy—stool eating—which is a fairly frequent, but nonetheless disgusting, habit developed by some puppies.

Striking your puppy, either with your hand, a newspaper, or any other object can have even more serious repercussions. It can break down the bond of trust, make your pup hand-shy, or worse yet—teach the dog to fight back with its teeth. In short, don’t do it.

Finally, if your dog does have an accident in the house, be sure to clean it up and deodorize the area thoroughly (there are several odor neutralizing cleaners available). This will help prevent your dog from coming back to the same spot next time it has the urge.

Putting It All Together

Let’s review three possible scenarios.

First scenario: Your pup has an accident in the house. You scold it, clean up the mess, and go about your business. What the pup has learned is that elimination evokes your displeasure. The result? Next time, it’ll try not to be noticed by sneaking off to a part of the house—where you aren’t—to heed the call of nature. To add insult to injury, your pup may not want to eliminate when you do take it for a walk. After all, you taught it that elimination in your presence is a punishable act.

Second scenario: Your pup has an accident. You correct it as in the first scenario, but put the pup outside before going about your chores. Has the pup learned anything different? Slightly. Your pup will probably make one of two associations: either that eliminating in your presence is bad, in which case the outcome is the same as above or that eliminating in the house is a ticket to the great outdoors. Oh goody.

Third scenario: Your pup starts to circle and sniff. You verbally signal the dog with an urgent “Do you need to go potty?” and whisk it outside. The pup now fulfills its need, and is lavishly praised for doing so. The message? Eliminating in the house is not permitted, but eliminating outside brings great favor. A few repetitions of this scenario and your pup will begin to make the connection, not only about housetraining, but also about the relationship between behavior, correction, and praise. And, you will have developed the start of a foundation for all of your dog’s future training.

We use this approach for our own dogs, and recommend it even for dogs that are primarily kennel dogs. It’s always useful when traveling to have a dog that understands the rules of where and when to eliminate.