

Housebreaking Puppies

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There is a standard question that comes with new puppies brought in for their first physical examination and vaccination: How do we house-train?

The first and most important procedure is to take the puppy out frequently. It should be taken out every 1 to 2 hours at first, as well as after it eats, wakes up from a nap, finishes playing (before it settles down for a nap), and at bedtime. At first, it should always be taken to the same place by the same route. Once the puppy is outside, patience is important. Just because a puppy doesn't eliminate within a minute or two doesn't mean that it doesn't need to. Some dogs, especially those learning new habits, may require several minutes in a location before they are ready to eliminate. As soon as the puppy starts to void, the owner should quietly say a word that they wish to become associated with the act of elimination. When the puppy is older, this word can be used as a cue to the dog to eliminate if it has any excrement to void. As soon as the puppy has finished, it should be praised and given a treat. Whoever has taken the puppy outside needs to bring the treat with them - if they wait until they get inside to give the puppy the treat, they will be rewarding it for coming inside, not for eliminating outside.

The Right Spot

At this point, puppies are learning substrate preferences as well as location preferences. Therefore, the location should be carefully selected according to long-term plans of what the owner wants the dog to seek out for elimination. Puppies trained to eliminate on lawns will likely seek out lawns when they are older; puppies trained to eliminate on pavement will likely seek out pavement.

When the puppy is inside, it should constantly be supervised, especially for the first few weeks. If it engages in behaviors that indicate it is about to eliminate, such as circling, squatting, or intensely sniffing at an area, its behavior should be disrupted. Often, just clapping the hands and calling the puppy while moving toward the door to the outside will be sufficient to distract it. If the puppy is not easily redirected, say "NO" (but not so sharply or loudly that the puppy is frightened), pick it up, and take it outside.

What Not to do

In addition to explaining to owners what they need to do to house-train the puppy, it is important to tell them what *not* to do. They should never use harsh punishments, such as spanking, yelling loudly, or rubbing its face in the excrement. Such punishments are likely to cause behavior problems such as submissive urination that are a result of fear. Also, the puppy should never be punished after the fact - even 2 seconds later. If a puppy is carried back to its excrement and punished there, it does not learn not to eliminate in the house, it learns that people are scary. People often think that the puppy "knows it's been bad" because it cowers. However, the puppy has simply learned to read human body language and tone of voice and is cowering because of the anticipated punishment, not because it associates defecating on the carpet 15 minutes ago with the current scolding.

Options to Constant Supervision

House-training is best conducted when someone can be with the puppy constantly for the first few weeks after it is adopted. However, this may not be an option with modern, busy families. If a puppy younger than 5 months of age must be left alone for a typical 8 to 9 hour workday, it is essential to remember that it cannot go this long without eliminating. Some dogs will not be able to go without eliminating for that long a period until they are even older. The puppy should not be left alone in a crate that is so small that, once it eliminates, it must lie in its own excrement. This results in the puppy becoming habituated to lying in its excrement and will make it extremely difficult to use the crate in the future to prevent elimination. Instead, in addition to training the puppy must go outside to eliminate in a specific location and on a specific substrate in the house. This can be paper, a litter box, or pads that are commercially available for this purpose. Confine the puppy in a space large enough for water and bedding as well as a specific area for elimination.

Daylong Strategies

Once the dog is physically able to wait the 8 or 9 hours that the owners are gone, the pater, litter box, or pads can be taken up and the dog can either be left loose in the house or confined to a crate that is small enough to preclude the dog from eliminating at one end and then lying at the other end. The transition to either method should be done gradually. For the first method, the dog can be left loose for brief periods, such as when the family is shopping for 1 or 2 hours. It must be taken out immediately before and after the owners' return. Over time, it can be left unsupervised for gradually longer periods. If the dog is to be crate-trained, begin by leaving the crate out with the door open and comfortable bedding and treats inside. The dog will enter for the treats and will learn that the crate is comfortable, safe place. Once this has happened, the door can be closed with the dog inside, first for a few minutes and then gradually for longer and longer periods.

House-training can be an easy and successful process. The keys are providing plenty of opportunities to learn what behavior results in rewards and making a gradual transition from management of the puppy to management of the adult as the dog matures.

What to DO

Take young puppy out every 1 to 2 hours, especially after it wakes up, plays, or eats

Praise puppy and give it a treat when it eliminates in desired location

Pair act of elimination with a word that can later be used as a cue

Supervise puppy constantly when it is in the house

Distract the puppy if it starts to eliminate in undesired location. Appropriate distractions include calling it and clapping the hands.

What Not to do

If the unsupervised puppy eliminates in the house, don't take it back to the excrement and punish it

Even if the puppy is "caught in the act," don't use strong punishment, such as spanking, yelling, or rubbing the puppy's nose in the excrement