

Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

Lore I. Haug, DVM
2627 Cordes Dr.
Sugar Land, TX 77479
281-980-3737

HOUSE TRAINING A PUPPY OR DOG

©2004 Bonnie Beaver, DVM, MS, DACVB
Lore I. Haug, DVM, MS, DACVB
Brooke Patterson, 4th year Veterinary Student

Of all a puppy's lessons, housetraining is one of the most necessary ones to teach, as it is not acceptable for a grown animal to eliminate wherever it pleases. Housetraining is easiest if consistent rules are established in the animal at an early age. It is important for owners to remember that during puppyhood, accidents may happen despite the best efforts of the owner. These incidents are not purposeful attempts by the pet to get even with the owner, and they should not be punished as such.

Patience and consistency are essential. It is a common mistake to take the puppy out for a few minutes, and return to the house before the puppy has completely eliminated. This happens most often during unpleasant weather when neither the owner nor the puppy wants to stay outside. Additionally, some puppies will urinate or defecate more than once in order to fully empty their bladder and bowels. Make sure the puppy has completed urinating and defecating before allowing it to come back inside.

Housetraining should begin when the puppy as soon as the puppy arrives in its new home; however, the puppy is most receptive to the process between 8 –12 weeks of age when it is capable of learning short lessons. Most young dogs tend to use the same area each time they eliminate; therefore, it is beneficial to take the animal to a consistent spot every time it is taken outside.

If you are having particular difficulty housetraining your puppy, please be sure the puppy has been thoroughly examined by a veterinarian. Health problems can interfere with the housetraining process.

THE FIVE MAJOR RULES OF HOUSETRAINING:

1) Numerous Trips Outside

There are four times a puppy typically eliminates.

1. Soon after waking up – i.e. a pup will eliminate after a nap and when first waking in the morning. Puppies sleep several times a day, thus have several waking periods.
2. After eating, the gastrocolic response produces a bowel movement. With three or four feedings each day, young puppies require a considerable number of trips outside.
3. Intense activity (e.g. playing or exercising) by the dog stimulates elimination.
4. Dogs normally eliminate before bedding-down at night.

Take the puppy out frequently. Give a consistent simple command (i.e. "Go potty"), and praise the puppy for eliminating in the correct area.

Strict schedules and a regular routine of resting, eating, and playing regulate the elimination process. When family members pursue random activities, the puppy's schedule, including the need to eliminate, varies also. In households where the puppy is left alone for 8 to 10 hours at a time, the pet tends to sleep most of the day. Occasionally accidents may happen, because at this age, the puppy cannot hold its bladder for long periods of time. In general,

puppies can be expected to hold their bladder for one hour for each month of age plus one. For example, an 8-week-old puppy should be taken outside at least every 3 hours during the day.

2) 100% Supervision When Not Confined

A puppy is learning every moment it is awake whether you are actively training it or not. If a puppy eliminates in the house, it learns that it is acceptable to do so. In the puppy's mind, using the bathroom in a nice, dry, quiet area is much better than having to go all the way outside and face the elements. To prevent this behavior from occurring, the owner must watch the puppy every second it is out of its crate or confinement area.

3) Confinement During Unsupervised Times

When left alone or you are unable to supervise the puppy, it should be confined in a small area such as a bathroom, utility room, or a small crate/pen. A space this size is large enough for a water bowl and clearly defined bedding area, yet limits the amount of space in which accidents can happen. Dogs generally prefer not to soil their bed area, so they are more inclined to retain urine and feces until they have access to an acceptable location for eliminating. However, puppies raised exclusively in cages, kennels or other close confinement areas may learn to preferentially eliminate in their cage area rather than elsewhere.

Puppies can be confined to a very small area, such as a crate, when owners are only gone for a few hours at a time (appropriate for their age – see above). If confined for long periods, the dog can learn to disregard cleanliness standards of the bed area. On the other hand, puppies given the run of the house have little incentive to learn to hold their bowels and bladder as they have the opportunity to eliminate in a variety of areas. If a puppy must be left for long periods of time, it should not be confined into a kennel, but rather in a room with access to its kennel. The puppy will be forced to eliminate on the floor but can retain the desire to keep its bed area (the crate) clean.

Dogs often learn to prefer one surface for elimination, possibly to the exclusion of all others. This preference occurs around 8 weeks of age. Newspaper, grass, concrete, or asphalt commonly becomes the chosen surface at the prompting of the owner. Dogs that will be expected to eliminate outdoors as adults should learn such as puppies. Do not start the puppy on newspaper and then expect it to adjust to something different later. When dogs raised outside are allowed into the house, carpet often serves as the surface most closely resembling grass.

4) Interruption During Inappropriate Elimination

As stated earlier, accidents may happen during the housetraining regimen. If the puppy begins to urinate or defecate in an inappropriate area, a simple "NO," or other noise, will serve to interrupt the action. Immediately take the puppy to the correct area to finish. Once they are eliminating in the acceptable location, praise their positive behavior. Punishments such as rubbing the puppy's nose in the urine or feces or spanking it after an accident has occurred do absolutely nothing to teach the puppy what it *should* do. Never punish the puppy after the fact! If anything, this will delay housetraining because the puppy may learn only to eliminate when the owner is not watching.

5) Positive Rewards for Correct Behavior

Rewards are strong motivators to reinforce the learning process in a dog. The effective memory span for a puppy is no longer than 30 seconds, so praise is best given when the dog is actually eliminating. This means going out with the puppy during the learning process. Another option is having a small treat to give the animal once it has completed eliminating in the correct area. The treat must be given immediately after the puppy has finished or the positive reward may be associated with something other than elimination. For example, giving the puppy a treat as or after it returns to the house will reward the puppy for coming back into the house, not for eliminating.

Housetraining need not be a painful, stressful experience for owners or their puppies. Patience, supervision, and positive rewards are the keys to a happy, housetrained puppy.