



Behavior and Training Department

Training Exercises

Housetraining, Young and Old

The best way to train a dog or puppy not to soil in the house is to be proactive and prevent it from happening in the first place. “Keeping an eye on her” is more wishful thinking than a solution. She can dart behind the sofa when you turn your back for a second. Each time she manages to go potty in the house, it becomes more of a habit and training becomes that much more difficult. Be sure to clean up all accidents with an enzyme cleaner, such as Nature’s Miracle, so she won’t seek out that spot to go again.

Elimination is such a non-event in a dog’s life that it is forgotten immediately, so punishment after the event, even minutes later, is almost always misunderstood by the dog. She probably will have no idea why you are so upset. She may conclude that you don’t want her to go potty at all, and will take pains to hide from you while she decorates places like your closet or bedroom. The worst case scenario is that she will decide that you are dangerous and be afraid of you—certainly not the relationship you want with your dog. If, however, you catch her in the very act, it’s OK to say “oops” or make a quick intake of air, then scoop her up to take her outside. All this can be avoided in most cases by following the routine below.

For a healthy dog, the best way to keep things dry and clean is with total management. When dealing with young puppies the easiest and most effective method is crate training. With older dogs, you can employ a variety of methods of restraint. If your dog seems restless, take her outside immediately. Remember, you are trying to prevent unwanted behavior. For the duration of the training, your dog should spend every waking minute, 24/7, in one of the following places.

1. Crate, with all padding removed. Dogs don’t seem to mind lying on a damp towel, but they don’t like lying in a puddle.
2. Tie-Down, a short leash attached to the baseboard or, for smaller dogs, to any immovable object.
3. Outside in a fenced yard - not all day, but for reasonable intervals.
4. On a leash, attached to an adult member of the family. Loop the leash around your wrist while you read or watch TV.

With this kind of confinement, do remember that it’s your responsibility to provide ample opportunity for your dog to eliminate at regular intervals. Generally, the younger the dog, the shorter the interval should be between opportunities. A rule of thumb would be about every two hours. In addition, you should take her out when she wakes up in the morning, after a long nap, after a play session, 10 or 15 minutes after each meal and any time she seems restless or anxious.

During the training period it’s best for you to accompany your dog outside. If the dog is more comfortable with one member of the family, that person should take her out. Go armed with small but really, really delicious treats, such as bits of chicken or steak. Pick a word or phrase, such as “hurry up!” and use this phrase every time you take her out. Some dogs are reluctant to go when on leash; others do not like to be watched. Go with the flow on these things, making it as easy as possible for your dog to succeed. You can watch her out of the corner of your eye, so that your praise can come IMMEDIATELY after she finishes. If you wait a few seconds, she may think you are praising her for any number of unrelated things, from lifting a paw to scratching her left ear.

Your praise should be lavish, as if she had just invented the wheel. Then give her several of those great little treats and take her back in the house. This is the only time she should get those special treats. If she shows no interest in relieving herself after 5 minutes or so, take her back inside to one of the places listed above, and try again in 15 minutes. Repeat this every 15 minutes until she goes potty, hiding your impatience as best you can. Greet success with the same enthusiasm and delicious treats as you would if she had cooperated the first time you took her out.



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Occasionally a dog will refuse to go outside, then pee on the floor the minute she gets in the house. Resist the urge to scream and accept the idea that she doesn't quite understand yet. She is not doing it to spite you. If she is off leash, the responsibility is yours for giving her the opportunity to make a mistake. If she is on leash, it's a perfect opportunity for you to scoop her up and rush back outside.

During the rainy season it's not uncommon for dogs to regress. When a house trained dog regresses, it is always a good idea to have your vet check her for a possible urinary infection. If she gets a clean bill of health, the sooner you address the problem, the better. You certainly don't want your dog to conclude that inside the house is a more comfortable bathroom than out in the rain. Should this happen, go back to square one, just as if she had never been house trained. It won't take nearly as long as it did the first time, especially if you catch it early.

If you've adopted an older dog, she must have been relieving herself someplace before you got her. If it was always on a certain surface—say, dirt or gravel—she may only feel comfortable going on that surface, and think she is doing what you want when she refuses to go in the place you have selected as her personal bathroom. If she relieves herself when on walks, observe what surface she chooses. If, for instance, she seems to prefer grass, and you want her to go on the bricks in your patio, put a small amount of sod in your patio. Proceed with the above routine, but when you take her outside, lead her to the spot with the sod. If this works, you can gradually cut down on the size of the sod, until it is gone. For the best chance of this working, take your time reducing the size.

If you like, you can use this training period to teach your dog how to ask to be let out when she needs to go. One simple and fun way is to say "Want to go outside?" or some such phrase. With a treat, lure her around into a spin just before you take her outside. In time she will associate the spin with going outside and will offer the behavior when she needs to go out. Alternatively, you can attach a small bell to the door you use to take her outside. Help her bat her paw at the bell when you say, "Want to go outside?" Then immediately take her out. The more cheerful you are about this, the more readily she will see it as a positive thing. Your friends will be impressed.

Some dogs are very easy to house train, while others are much more difficult. If yours seems slow to catch on, and you are doing all the things you can to help her, don't assume she is stupid. After all, Einstein, though a genius in theoretical physics, had trouble learning to read, but he did eventually succeed. Your dog may never shine in physics or the written word, but with consistent training, she can succeed in the important job of being potty trained.

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