

## Houstraining Puppies and Dogs

Everyone has an opinion regarding housebreaking or "houstraining", as the action is properly termed today. There are probably as many houstraining techniques as there are dog trainers. It is unfortunate that very few of these techniques consistently produce a pet that is totally houstrained. Since no one wants to live with an animal that urinates or defecates in the wrong areas, houstraining is critical to the success of a pet-owner bond. Owners need to be able to houstrain their pet as rapidly as possible, and to find a method that works for young and old animals.

All dogs require houstraining. The bottom line is that owners of puppies and new dogs need a reliable, consistent plan to help their pet understand that it is inappropriate to urinate and defecate in the house, and appropriate to perform these actions in specified places outside the house. Before discussing methods that work, it is crucial to look at those that do not. The biggest mistake that owners make is to punish a dog that inappropriately eliminates in the house. Rubbing the dog's nose in its waste, yelling, hitting, swinging newspapers, and dragging a dog outside after an accident do not teach the dog the proper behavior. They merely frighten the dog. At best, these techniques do not work. At worst, they help create a dog that is terrified of its owner, the outdoors, and the house, and that may even reflexively squat and urinate when the owner is near. So punishment is pointless. It is totally counterproductive if the dog eliminates in the house and the 'accident' is found later. No matter what an owner thinks and no matter how nervous the dog looks, the dog has no idea why it is being punished and is merely reacting in a nervous manner to an angry owner.

The second mistake involves using paper to houstrain a puppy and assuming that this will somehow train the dog to relieve itself outdoors. Dogs that are paper trained may learn simply to eliminate on any flat surface in the house. They may miss the paper and eliminate on the floor or rugs. Others learn to use the paper, but must then be re-taught, from the beginning, how to eliminate outdoors. As a matter of fact, it can actually be more difficult to train a paper-trained dog to switch to the outdoors because the pet is used to eliminating inside the house. Finally, the use of paper as a 'bathroom' should never be a replacement for daily walks and exercise, no matter how small the dog or how cold the day.

The last mistake is to assume that a dog will hold its urine or feces if the dog is left in a crate. While it is true that confinement in a small area may encourage a dog to wait to eliminate, the technique is flawed if used incorrectly. Many small dogs and young dogs simply do not have adequate sphincter control to hold their urine for hours. Left in a crate, they will urinate, will sit in their urine, and will not learn house training. Young dogs should not be left alone in a crate for more than a few hours. They should not be left for an entire work day, and they should be visited, let out the crate, and allowed to relieve themselves during the day. This will help the dog learn the proper place to eliminate far more rapidly than being left by itself in the crate all day. It may require that a house sitter visit for a few weeks or months, but it is the fastest and most humane way to train a puppy.

It is also a mistake to think that a puppy left in a crate overnight will somehow ignore the urge to eliminate if it wakes up. To properly houstrain a young dog, those pleas for a bathroom break must be heeded, even if it is the middle of the night. Simply get the dog outside, tell it this was a job well done, and put it back into its crate or bed for the night. Do not play with the dog or turn the event into an all night romp. If only allowed to relieve itself and then immediately put back to bed, the dog will eventually sleep through the night and this behavior will cease.

With all the mistakes people make, is it possible to correctly and rapidly house train a dog? It certainly is! The key is to take an active, consistent, and positive role in houstraining the dog. Do not wait for the dog to announce its need or have an accident and do not put the dog outside by itself, close the door, and assume it relieves itself. Instead, arrange the environment and schedule to help avoid accidents, be present to use positive rewards and encouragement, and

make sure to take the dog outside many, many times each day. Go outside with the dog, wait for the dog to eliminate, and reward the proper behavior with praise every time it happens. Consistently show the dog where to go, make sure the dog gets there when it needs to, and congratulate it for a job well done. With this simple formula, most dogs will be housetrained in a matter of weeks.

The positive reinforcement method requires the owner to monitor the dog at all times in order to avoid accidents. This is especially important with puppies and older dogs that do not understand exactly what is expected of them. If necessary, the animal can be tied with a long leash around the owner's waist, so that it is not out of sight. Puppies should be taken outside within moments of waking from a nap or eating, and before and after play sessions. This means that a very young puppy may literally have to be brought outside to the proper place, with its owner, ten or twelve times per day.. The puppy can be walked on a leash or carried to the appropriate place. Walking and playing may actually stimulate the dog to urinate or defecate. Once the dog starts to eliminate, stop walking or playing, and praise the dog in a happy, but quiet tone. Too exuberant a response may interrupt the dog. Keep up the praise until the puppy is done. One may choose to use a code word at this time, so that the dog learns to associate the word with the action and will eventually be able to comply when asked to eliminate.

The number of daily trips taken outdoors will diminish as the dog ages. The eight week old puppy that goes out every hour on the hour rapidly grows to the six month old dog that goes out five or six times per day, and all too soon becomes an adult dog that is satisfied with three or four bathroom breaks each day. An older dog that is not housetrained or one that needs a refresher course may need several trips out each day until a pattern can be created or identified. Then the dog can be taken out at age-appropriate intervals. Older dogs are housetrained using the same positive reinforcement techniques as puppies.

By keeping a close eye on the dog and frequently taking the dog to the pre-selected elimination site, the dog will rapidly learn which behaviors are expected of it. By taking the dog out after each meal and each nap, preferably more often than required, housetraining can be accomplished with a minimum of accidents. Unfortunately, no owner is perfect and a few accidents are to be expected.

Accidents will occur if the owner is preoccupied, loses track of the dog, or is too busy to get outdoors. These accidents should be cleaned up without a fuss. After all, they are really the fault of the owner, not the dog. The owner may be allowing the puppy the run of the house, forgetting to get the dog outside after each nap, or missing cues from the dog that a trip outside is needed. Owners that yell and belittle a dog end up with a dog that is frightened of the owner and still unsure just exactly where to eliminate. One well-known trainer has suggested that every time a dog urinates in the house, the owner should roll up a newspaper and whack him or herself in the head. The comment was made in jest, but the point was well-made that the owner is responsible for a dog's behaviors. So the accident should be cleaned thoroughly with an appropriate enzymatic cleaner and the positive housetraining effort resumed. This allows an owner to avoid inappropriate punishment, bond with a new or young dog, and rapidly have a dog that is housetrained.

A properly housetrained dog or cat knows where to relieve itself and where not to. This is not an innate behavior, but one that must be taught properly by an owner. The use of positive reinforcement and an active approach to teaching the pet will rapidly help the animal to learn. Once learned correctly, this behavior stays with most pets their entire lives, and makes everyone a little bit happier. It allows owner and pet to bond correctly, without worrying every second about accidents in the house.

Sincerely,  
Dr. Jane Leon

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