



Critters corner presents: **House Training Your Dog**

Almost the first thing a new puppy owner needs to know is “how do I house train”? How do I do it, what can I expect, what should be my goals?

Without the right advice, owners can flounder around trying to house train their pup for months and, in some cases, years.

Opinions and expectations vary greatly on this matter, though there are some common truths. Some maintain that pups can be adopted already house trained at the age of 9 weeks but you have to understand the certain physiological limitations if you are to achieve and maintain this utopian state. At the other end of the spectrum are certain terrier breeders who maintain that their pups cannot be fully housetrained until they are 1 year of age, but I suspect these folk are doing something wrong.

It is probably par for the course to bring home a 2 or 3 month old pup that when unsupervised, has occasional accidents on the floor, and it is probably reasonable to expect to have the pup fully trained by 4 months of age. In order to achieve this goal one has to know what one is doing, to invest some time and attention, and to be very patient.

Physiological Limitations

Young puppies of 2, 3, and even 4-months of age have limitations when it comes to the time for which they can contain their urine. The younger they are the less control they have over the muscles that start and stop the flow of urine and the more frequent “bathroom breaks” need to be. The usual formula for estimating the number of hours for which a puppy can hold its urine is $N+1$, where N is the puppy’s age in months. So, for example, a 3-month old puppy should be able to hold its urine for approximately 4 hours in a pinch. This means that if you have a properly toilet trained 4-month-old puppy that, theoretically, can hold its urine for 5 hours, and you shut that pup in a crate for 6 or 7 hours, you are courting disaster. Puppies that are crated for longer than they can contain themselves will be forced to soil where they stand. This creates problems down the line as soiling within the crate destroys a valuable reflex to keep the nest clean.

Sample Schedule for a 3-month Old Puppy

- Working on the basis that a 3-month old puppy can hold its urine for up to 4 hours any house training schedule for a pup of this age must be designed with this fact in mind.
- Starting at the beginning of the day, it is important to take the puppy outside first thing to a carefully selected area and to encourage it to void urine and feces. It is best to have the pup on lead so it doesn’t wander off and become engaged in some other absorbing activity. It is also important to use some word cue that the pup will associate with elimination. The late, great Barbara Woodhouse popularized the expression, “Hurry up,” as the verbal cue but others have used words like, “Make,” or even “Poopies.” Note: The significance of the chosen area can be imparted to the young pup via its sense of smell by depositing a small piece of urine-soaked newspaper in the vicinity.
- Assuming a successful mission at, say, 7:00 a.m., the latest time that the pup can be taken out for its next “bathroom run” would be 11:00 a.m. The same ritual as before is engaged.
- The next times for the pup to be taken out are 3:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., and then 11:00 p.m. The ritual is always the same.

- A pup of 3-months of age will probably not be able to make it through the night without a trip outside. Setting the alarm for 3:00 a.m. may be the only way to stop the pup from soiling at night, but don't worry, this stage of puppy hood doesn't last long.
- In addition to the aforementioned times for taking the puppy outside, the youngster should be taken out 10 or 15 minutes after each meal, as eating stimulates the gastrocolic reflex. Note that different pups will have slightly different times after a meal at which they need to go to the bathroom. Learn how long it takes in your pup to "feel the urge" and be cognizant of this fact.
- Another key time to take puppies outside is when they transition from one activity into another. For example, when they wake up after a nap, when they have finished a period of vigorous play, and when they have just completed a bout of chewing.

What If

Common Situations...What TO DO if...

What To Do if a "Bathroom Run" is Successful

Your puppy must know, in no uncertain terms, that it has done something that meets with your vigorous approval when it urinates or defecates outside. Sing its praises, clap your hands, jump up and down, and make such a fuss that if the neighbors saw you they might think that you've finally "lost it." In addition, pet the pup like you mean it and give it a morsel of delicious food. This is all-powerful positive reinforcement for a job well done.

What To Do if the "Bathroom Run" is Unsuccessful

Confinement is the name of the game if a trip outside proves to be a dry run, especially when you know it's been a couple or three hours since the last trip outside. There are four ways in which a puppy's freedom can be limited under these circumstances while you watch it with an eagle eye.

- 1) One is in a crate, unless the pup has had previous adverse crate experiences causing phobic of them.
- 2) Another means of confinement is behind a "kiddy gate", for example, placed across a recess in the kitchen.
- 3) Then there is tethering the pup on a reasonably short lead to a fixture in a room, but you should remain nearby.
- 4) Finally, there is so-called "umbilical cord training" in which you attach the pup, by means of a lead, to a belt you're wearing so that it is forced to stay within a certain radius of you.

The duration of the confinement should be approximately 15-minutes and then you should take the pup outside, again, and give it another opportunity for outdoor elimination. A second unproductive trip will necessitate a further 15-minute period of confinement, and so on, until your endeavors meet with success.

What To Do if Your Puppy has an Accident Inside

First and foremost, **do not punish your puppy for having an accident inside the house**. The blame rests squarely on your shoulders for not providing an appropriate, timely opportunity for outdoor elimination. Rather, learn to appreciate the subtle signs the puppy exhibits before eliminating indoors (circling, sniffing, etc.) and apprehend it before it gets into the squatting position so that you can escort it outside. If you are a few moments too late and the puppy is caught midstream, it is reasonable to make a loud noise as a distraction to arrest the flow of urine by causing the pup's sphincters to contract. Then, with a smile on your face, escort or carry the pup outside to the proper location to finish its business. Later, return to clean the area thoroughly with odor neutralizer. If you find accidents after the fact, you're a day late and a dollar short. Just clean up the mess, as described, and put it down to experience. Learn from *your* mistakes. Perhaps you waited too long; perhaps the pup was in an area where you could not see it. Take appropriate actions to avoid future problems.

What If You Have to Leave Your Puppy for Longer Than it Can Hold Its Urine?

The bottom line is you can't. If you leave a pup for longer than it can hold its urine, it will have an accident and this will set you back on the housebreaking schedule. Instead, you should bring the pup with you, where possible, and bear in mind its needs. Or, you can leave your pup with an informed neighbor who will take over the training where you left off. If you have to go out of the house for 2 or 3 hours, it is reasonable to confine the pup in a small area where it is less likely to soil (e.g. in a crate or gated off area with a supply of food and water). Anything over 2 to 3 hours is tempting fate and, anyway, is not good for the pup. If the pup is used to being confined at night and does not experience grief, this is the best option. If it whimpers or whines a bit, tend to it at reasonable intervals, including taking it to its outdoor bathroom at appropriate intervals.

Housebreaking Older Puppies

For pups in the 4-7 month age group, a similar schedule can be adopted though the time interval between trips outside can be lengthened, making the schedule a little easier on the owner. Fixed-point excursions might be, for example, first thing in the morning, at lunchtime, in the late afternoon, early evening, and before bedtime. Extra trips outside should be made following mealtimes and after the pup transitions from one activity to another, as before. At this stage, older pups should be able to hold their urine through the night, though it may be necessary to rise a little earlier than usual to prevent early morning accidents. It's not a good idea to allow an untrained older pup to have free access to all areas of the house, rather it should be confined to areas where it can be observed and apprehended, if necessary i.e. actively trained.

Conclusion

House training a puppy is like potty-training an infant. The more time and attention you invest up front, the more rapidly the end result will be achieved. Think about it this way, your investment of time early in the pup's life will save you much time, energy, and aggravation in the long run. With an intense effort, a puppy can be house broken within 7 days, that is, if you have the patience. Even with a less than optimal effort, house breaking can be achieved within 2 to 4 weeks, so that by the time a pup is 4 months old, it should be properly house trained or you are doing something wrong. Incidentally, these same principles of training also apply to older puppies, who learn equally rapidly and have an even greater capacity to "hold it in." There is simply no excuse for having older puppies that are not house trained. If house soiling persists, it is as a result of owners not providing the appropriate opportunities for their pups to learn.