

Houstraining your Puppy

(By Dee Ganley)

The puppy has arrived! The kids are crazy about him, he's cute as a button and lots of fun, and oops! He's just had an accident on your best rug. Houstraining is the least enjoyable aspect of raising a dog but we hope the following information will make it easier for you *and* the puppy.

Puppies have very small bladders and they digest their food quite quickly so they need to go to the bathroom very frequently. Therefore, the more often you can get the puppy outside, (always on a leash, don't forget), the fewer accidents that will occur. Don't be surprised if initially you have to make the trip every 30-45 minutes – yes, it does seem like every 10 seconds! Always go to the same spot and use whatever catchphrase you like: “go potty” or “hurry up” for example. Allow the puppy a reasonable amount of time (2-3 minutes) to accomplish his task, then praise and reinforce (give a small food reward) when the job is done. As the puppy grows older and his bladder control gets better, he may not actually need to go to the bathroom when you take him. If this happens, after 2-3 minutes tell him, “too bad”, take him back in the house and put him in his crate (told you the crate would come in handy...) for 15 minutes or so, then try again. If you faithfully and consistently follow this regime the housebreaking period should be quite short.

You're probably wondering what happened to (and what's wrong with) the traditional “stick his nose in it, smack him, and yell NO!” This method is not all that effective. The dog in fact does not make the leap of understanding that you are hoping for; that defecating or urinating in the house is wrong – a purely human concept. Animals eliminate wherever they happen to be – there is no right or wrong place with the one exception of their den space, which in your puppy's case is his crate. While a dog will eventually become housebroken using this method (mainly because his control becomes better), it also guarantees that you will end up with a dog that will not eliminate in front of you, which presents real problems when you go to the vet or when traveling. It is your responsibility to teach (and punishing is not teaching) the puppy where he may go to the bathroom and where he may not. This is accomplished far more readily using positive reinforcement. You want your puppy to view you as the source of all the good things in his life: traditional housebreaking methods definitely do NOT fall under this heading.

Puppies do try to let you know when they need to go out: sniffing the floor anxiously, circling and sometimes whining are all tell-tale signs but often by the time we catch on it's too late. If the puppy has already had an accident, it's too late to take him out – again. The puppy will not make the association you are looking for. A regular timetable, no matter how many trips outside a day (or night) are necessary, will expedite the whole procedure more than anything else.

“What goes up must come down” and with puppies, what goes in must come out. Consult with your veterinarian or local trainer about how much to feed and how often – the amounts suggested on the back of the puppy chow bag are aimed at selling more food rather than what a puppy needs for healthy growth. Overfeeding can cause serious physical problems that result from the puppy growing too fast. It will also add to the number of trips you have to make outside. Free access to clean, fresh water is a must for dogs of any age but for puppies, restrict water (and food) intake after 6 PM. This will help eliminate that trip outside at 3 AM.

As your puppy grows up, you can teach him to ring a bell to let you know that he needs to go out. Begin by rewarding him for any interaction with the a bell (a giant Christmas jingle bell on a string is perfect). Then hand the bell on the door and teach him to touch the bell with his nose – reinforce by saying “YES!” and giving him a food treat when he does. Follow this by immediately taking him outside to his “spot”. Again, give him a reasonable time frame to the job done. If successful, praise and treat. If not, say “too bad” and return to the house. The puppy will very quickly learn that he get to go out when he rings the bell and that he will be rewarded (reinforced) for going to the bathroom – a good deal for everyone involved.

No matter how diligently you work on houstraining accidents *will* happen. But do remember that it is just that – an accident, not something your puppy does out of spite or stubbornness or to “get back at you”. Dogs just don’t think that way. Don’t get angry and please don’t punish your dog. The more time and effort you put into houstraining, the sooner it will be done. Be patient, not punitive. As time consuming (and sometimes frustrating) as it may be, you can make housebreaking a positive training experience that will strengthen the positive and fun relationship that you are building with your puppy.

If you would like more information about houstraining or need help with aspecific houstraining problems, please email Dee at dee@deesdogs.com

P.S. To all dog owners: when walking your dog or taking him out in public, please clean up after him. Plastic bags are great for this.