

Houstraining

Houstraining can be a pretty big issue. Sometimes our expectations are too high or too low. Sometimes we still use the techniques our parents taught us — stick the dog or puppy's nose in the mess and yell “Bad Dog!” and then take it outside. Unfortunately, all most dogs learn from this technique is to avoid the owner when eliminating (“if I poo in front of you, you grab my neck and stick my face in yucky stuff”), and/or to hide the in-house elimination so that they don't get their noses pushed into the mess. There are better and more effective ways. Techniques to consider (and these can be combined sometimes):

General Things to Consider

Timing for Puppies: Puppies need to go outside every one to two hours. They need to go out after vigorous play (with 5-10 minutes), after eating (within 15 minutes), after drinking (within 15 minutes), first thing after waking up in the morning, last thing before going to bed at night. If you want the houstraining to go even more quickly, if the puppy wakes you up at 3:00 am, by whining, take it outside. You can retrain this later, but teaching communication skills about elimination are really important—if the puppy is trying to communicate this need, reward this behavior with going outside responses.

Activities: If your dog asks to go outside (on leash) but doesn't eliminate, it may just be enjoying the “great outdoors.” This sometimes frustrates people, who have busy schedules and limited time, but it's good for the dog to have yard or leash time, and it will help with houstraining in the long run.

Delayed or No Eliminations: Sometimes people complain that they stay outside “forever” with the dog, finally give up, come in the house, and the dog immediately eliminates inside. This usually means that the dog has learned one of two things: 1) the sooner I eliminate, the sooner I have to go inside. I like it out here, so if I hold it, I get more outside time; 2) if I eliminate when my owner sees me eliminate, I get yelled at (i.e., dog eliminated inside house; owner caught it in the act and yelled (or worse), thus, dog learns to avoid eliminating when owner is around). For the first, don't rush inside after the dog has eliminated, wait 10 minutes or more and make it fun. For the second, use one of the training techniques below, stop yelling at your dog for elimination and, when outside, use a long cotton 15'-30' leash (*not* an extending leash, please). That way the dog can move comfortably away from you while outside to eliminate. Then praise and reward the dog for eliminating outside.

Dog Doors: I love dog doors. Training a dog to go through a dog door is easy. And the dog can take itself outside whenever it wants to, even at night. I never have to walk my dogs, get up to let them out or let them in. We have a lovely big fenced yard where they can hunt and chase and eat grass. Some people worry about critters getting in—this is actually pretty rare. Critters don't like to be chased by dogs, so the dogs usually keep them out.

Doggy Door Bells: You can teach your dog to ask to go outside. Hang a bell from the door handle (doggy door bells are actually sold on the internet—but you can use any bell). Put a little bit of peanut butter on it—so the dog will want to lick or bite the bell. Encourage the dog to push it harder, and every time the bell rings, open the door and let the dog out (or put on a leash and walk it). Give lots of praise and encouragement. The only rule is that you *have to* answer the bell—don't ignore it and don't tune it out—open the door and let the dog out! This is a great communication device, and is the next best thing to a dog door.

I. Puppies younger than 5 or 6 weeks may not have the muscle control needed to “wait” until it's time to go out. They just “go.” If you want to houstrain such a young puppy, expect to take it outside every hour or so. Expect to have to watch it closely at all times. When it begins to sniff and or circle, take it outside.

II. Puppies older than six weeks, and Adult Dogs: These will have the brain development to control those muscles. But they still need to be watched and taken outside frequent. Truthfully, the easiest puppies to train are those which have been kept on dirt or grass most of the day, rather than in a house, basement, or garage.

Puppies who start out eliminating outside only have to learn one thing to be housetrained: how to communicate that they need to go outside. (The owners also have to learn to “listen” and to oblige the request!!!) Puppies who start out eliminating inside, have to learn three things: 1) What used to be acceptable is no longer acceptable; 2) Outside is the only acceptable place to “go;” 3) How to communicate that they need to go outside. Learning one thing is always easier than learning three, but most puppies are going to be raised inside, so what do we do? There are three primary training techniques: paper training, “umbilical cord” training, and crate training. If you have the time to spend (take a week’s vacation), you can train most puppies and dogs within one week. Accidents will happen but the training will go pretty quickly.

Training Techniques

I. Paper Training: The idea behind paper training is that dogs can learn to go to a particular substrate, and you can control the location of the substrate. If you can’t watch the dog or puppy, gate it in a location near an outside door (like a kitchen or family room). Give it things to chew and other toys so it isn’t bored. Cover the entire floor with newspaper or puppy pads. If you notice the animal sniffing or circling, take it outside. Let it eliminate on the paper. Gradually, every few days, decrease the amount of floor that is covered by the paper, always ensuring that the “shrinking” moves the paper to collect near the outside door. When you let the puppy outside in the yard, or if you take it for an elimination walk, place used (previously eliminated on) paper where you want the dog to eliminate. The odor cues will help. Continue to shrink the size of the paper indoors until it is a single sheet, just inside the door. Then train the puppy to tell you when it has to go by using something like the “ring the bell” technique (see below). (Note: my mother always used this technique and it worked very well.)

II. “Umbilical Cord” Training: The idea behind this is that puppies and dogs like to wander off to eliminate. By doing so they don’t get yelled at (until later, but see above), they don’t have to eliminate where they “hang out” with you, and they get that wonderfully rewarding feeling of eliminating when they feel the need. So put the dog on an “umbilical cord.” Attach a six-foot leash to the dog on one end, and to your wrist or ankle on the other. Every time the dog begins to wander off, ask if it wants to go out, and take it outside. Now, sometimes the dog will learn that this is a great way to get taken outside for more attention and outside time, even if it doesn’t have to eliminate. But it’s better to put up with this, and to praise and reward for outside elimination. If you catch the dog this way (it sniffs, it squats, it tries to wander away while sniffing), take it outside, and reward it for eliminating (praise, petting, and treats). The primary goal of this technique is that it rapidly teaches communication skills for both parties involved. You’ll tune in on when the dog needs to go out, and the dog will learn to ask you to be taken out. The disadvantage is that the dog will likely ask to go out just for fun sometimes. But there are worse alternatives.

III. Crate Training: The idea behind crate training is that dogs normally won’t eliminate where they sleep, nor in a small confined space where they cannot escape the mess. This isn’t always true, but is true most of the time. Sometimes anxiety and stress can lead to elimination problems in a crate. Sometimes waiting too long, especially for puppies, to release them from the crate will lead to elimination, because they just can’t hold it any longer. One key important point: you must crate train the dog before you stick it in a crate to housetrain it. That’s another blog—but, believes me, just shutting a dog into a crate and walking away is a really bad idea. Crate Training—after taking the dog out for its morning elimination, put it in the crate for an hour or two (depending on age). Give it chews and toys so it’s not bored. Take it out routinely. Gradually build up the time it can tolerate in the crate. Always reward outdoor eliminations. Put the dog in the crate at night so that it won’t eliminate while you are sleeping, then let it outside the first thing in the morning. Do not use the crate as a punishment for a mistake.

While private owners don’t have to follow USDA standards for crate sizing, I believe they are a good source of guidance. A crate should be big enough so that the dog can stand upright, sit (with 6” of space above its head), turn around, and lay down full outstretched on its side. However, if a crate is much bigger than this, the dog may eliminate in it because it can get away from the mess. For rapidly growing puppies, I like the crates that have a moveable back wall. You can increase the crate size as the puppy grows. Once the puppy has learned to ask to go outside, you don’t need the crate for control any more.

When Houstraining Backslides

Finally, if your dog has been successfully houstrained and then suddenly backslides, here are some questions to consider:

1. **Is the Dog Sick?** Are you seeing frequent urination, loose or runny stool, hard stool or constipation, vomiting? If any of these signs are present, the dog may not be able to help itself, and it's time for a call/visit to the veterinarian.
2. **Is it Separation Anxiety?** Some dogs develop separation anxiety. This where the dog has an anxiety attack when left alone in the home. Symptoms may include destructive behavior, especially around windows, door frames, and flooring or carpeting near windows and doorframes, destruction of furniture, panting, drooling, chronic barking, howling, or moaning (neighbors may complain about the noise), urination or defecation in the house (often on the owner's bed). Separation Anxiety-related housebreaking problems are not about "punishing you for leaving me alone." The dog is not angry at you. It is not being spiteful. It is having an anxiety attack and is doing everything it can to relieve the anxiety. Separation anxiety will not resolve by punishing the dog for houstraining errors. Instead, talk to your veterinarian and an animal behaviorist for help with this issue. When the Separation Anxiety is resolved, the houstraining problem will disappear.
3. **Is The Dog Developing Canine Cognitive Dysfunction (Senile Dementia)?** If your dog is an older dog (5 yrs or older), this is a possibility. Again, the dog is not "punishing you for leaving me alone." The dog is not angry at you. It is not being spiteful. It becomes disoriented and forgets its training. There are medications that can help—contact your veterinarian. But often treatment is not available, and instead "management" is needed. When you cannot watch the dog, restrict the dog to limited areas of the home that can tolerate inappropriate elimination. This may be a gate across the kitchen door, a crate for limited periods of time. It may mean providing puppy pads or newspapers on the floor, in the most likely used areas. Some people put their dogs in doggie diapers—and some dogs tolerate these quite well.
4. **Is the Dog Developing Urinary Incontinence?** Some older dogs (most notably females) develop urinary incontinence where they simply leak. Doggie Diapers can help, sometimes medication can help. Contact your veterinarian to discover what is the most likely cause and best solution.