
HOUSE TRAINING

SUGGESTED METHOD

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Assignment description

'House training problems are quite common and cause both puppy and owner distress. Discuss how you would house train a puppy, indicating how long this may take, and by what age you would expect him to be reliable by day and by night. You may use crate training or another method as you prefer'

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Introduction

Disclaimer

I tend to always use the 'him' pronoun as most of my dogs have been males, and it is more convenient than consistently writing him/her and more personal than 'it'. Please read no gender-bias into this.

About potty-training

Most canine puppies arrive home less-than-100%, if at all, house-broken. To a great extent, the breeder cannot be blamed much, with the best will in the world one cannot start house-training earlier than what is physiologically possible. Thus house-training is often mostly left in the hands of the pup's permanent family. And quite the responsibility it is too: the consequences for getting it wrong can make the difference between a fantastic pet and a constant string of guilt-laden chores.

It is therefore essential that owners are given clear, well researched and effective advice to tackle this training phase successfully. This essay attempts to do just that. Please note that the method I suggest is but one of the many possible approaches of equal worth. One guideline that is of essential importance, though, and where most modern training methods are in agreement, is to refrain from punishing the dog for 'accidents'.

The information used for this essay was obtained from a variety of recommendations I have gleaned over years of reading and interacting with dog professionals and owners alike. Where facts from a written source are stated, I duly back them up with a reference to allow the reader independent verification.

Timescale

When tackling house-training, it is perhaps useful to be familiar with the relevant physiological and behavioural development stages of the puppy. Thus this section lists salient development milestones in chronological order for the reader's reference (Ref 9: Horwitz, Debra – 1999 and Ref 3: Diamond Davis, Kathy – undated).

- **1 – 2 weeks:** Puppies start eliminating without urogenital stimulation by their mother.
- **3 weeks:** They go away from the nest to eliminate.
- **5 weeks:** They start eliminating in a regular spot.
- **6 weeks:** They need to eliminate approximately one hour after a meal or exciting event.
- **7.5 – 8.5 weeks:** House-training may start.
- **9 weeks:** Distinct elimination postures develop in males (stand and lean forward) and females (squat) [Ref 9: Horwitz, Debra – 1999].
- **8.5 weeks:** They start developing substrate preference (i.e. showing a predilection for eliminating on grass, gravel, sand, etc.) – [Ref 9: Horwitz, Debra – 1999].
- **9 weeks:** They can control their bowel and bladder for 2 to 3 hours during daytime (Ref 4: Dog Breed Info Center). At night, the puppy is likely to have slightly greater bladder autonomy as its body matches its biological functions (elimination included) to its restful state. (Ref 3: Diamond Davis, Kathy – undated).
- **13 weeks:** They can control their bowel and bladder for approximately 4 hours during daytime. (Ref 4: Dog Breed Info Center)
- **14 weeks:** Most pups can last all night (Ref 4: Dog Breed Info Center).
- **18 weeks:** They can control their bowel and bladder for 5 hours or more during daytime (Ref 4: Dog Breed Info Center)
- **17 to 26 weeks:** Depending on the individual pup, they can become reliably house-trained at any time within this period. (Ref 9: Horwitz, Debra – 1999)
- **18 to 26 weeks:** Male puppies begin to lift their leg when urinating. (Ref 9: Horwitz, Debra – 1999)

Suggested method

Overview of method

The house-training plan I suggest:

- Advises periods of crate confinement;
- Does not use punishment (physical or otherwise); and
- Requires frequent and long periods of close supervision.

Material requirements

Before you get started, you shall need:

- A crate;
- A chew toy or other comfort for in the crate; and
- A leash and collar.

Plan step 1 – Get him out on time

When you first get your pup, try to take him out every hour or so during daytime.

An APDT report (Ref 1: APDT) even advises to do this every ½ hour, but I find this an unrealistic demand on the owner. If the owner feels they can take on the ½-hour rhythm, however, the more frequently the dog is let out, the better.

In addition to the hourly outings, the pup should be led out on the following occasions:

- First thing in the **morning**. Note: This is closer to 6-7am than 11am;
- Last thing at **night**: After 11pm or midnight would be best as it reduces the long period at night during which the pup is not let out;
- 15 to 30 minutes **after the pup has eaten or drunk**. This is based on the fact that a full stomach triggers colonic activity within between 10 minutes and ½ hour.' (Ref 9: Horwitz, Debra – 1999). Note: As a more predictable routine is more convenient for the owner, it is advisable to feed him at regular times while building up his house-training (Ref 2: Animed Veterinary Group - 2006).
- After **excitement** (like wild play, rough exercise or a visitor);
- After a **nap**; and
- If he is showing any of **sign that he needs to go (see the warning signs below)**.

Unconscious warnings and how to react

- Leg lift (or the beginnings thereof);
- Lifting the tail;
- Crouching down; and/or
- Circling and sniffing.

Do your utmost to interrupt the behaviour without startling him or otherwise aversively engaging with him. A good strategy is to distract him with a strange -but

not scary - sound or movement. As soon as you have his attention, gently guide him to the garden and casually wait a couple of minutes for him to resume elimination. Praise him gently when he starts eliminating.

Deliberate warnings and how to react

- Pawing you;
- Scratching the garden door; and/or
- Whining.

Conscious warnings will not come immediately, and should be encouraged. Thus when he deliberately warns you, praise him gently to reinforce the behaviour, and lead him out (which is also a reward given his motivational state).

Occasionally, it may be difficult to distinguish an elimination warning from unwelcome attention seeking. Practice, and familiarity with your dog's routine, should help you to make that assessment. The way to tackle unwelcome attention seeking goes beyond the scope of this essay,

Plan step 2 – Take the pup to the 'drop zone'

At the appropriate time, gently guide the pup to the 'drop zone' using a leash.

A good location to start with:

- Is easily and quickly accessible;
- Is relatively devoid of intense distractions (such as pushy off leash dogs, gushing humans, or very loud street traffic); and
- Has a substrate which will continue to be an appropriate elimination surface for the rest of his life (e.g. grass).

Note on substrate preference: Be careful not to overly restrict your dog's choice, as you may find yourself in a situation where that particular surface is not available. Ensure also that you do not allow your dog to develop a preference for eliminating on a surface that is not entirely appropriate (e.g. the pavement or tiles), as it will give you peace of mind – and avoid embarrassment - to know that he won't eliminate on those surfaces.

Plan step 3 - Reward

Once on the spot, and while waiting for the verdict (will he/won't he?), adopt a relaxed demeanour. As far as your dog is concerned, a relaxed demeanour means that:

- You do not face him directly;
- You do not stare intensely;
- You do not hold your breath;
- You relax your muscles; and
- You leave him some space.

This minimizes the chance that the puppy picks up on your intensity and gets 'stage fright', which would potentially delay elimination.

If he eliminates, gently praise him. I emphasise on 'gentle' as excessive exuberance may put off nervous pups and distract excitable ones. Do be quick with your praise, starting as early as the start of his elimination. This will put in place the learning connection between his action and the reward much more effectively than waiting a few seconds.

The reason I do not recommend the use of food, in contradiction with an APDT report on the subject (Ref 1: APDT), is that, in my view, elimination and ingestion are, physiologically speaking, rather incompatible behaviours. If you start feeding your dog when he has just started eliminating, he may interrupt the elimination process to get to the food more quickly.

If the pup does not eliminate after a few minutes, casually guide him back in and do not make an issue of it. He is being neither punished nor rewarded, so endeavour to show a very neutral demeanour in those circumstances. This means avoiding to inadvertently reward him by giving him positive attention (e.g. playing with him, talking to him, stroking him). Let a few seconds, perhaps a minute, pass by before you 'resume business as usual'. By the same token, he is not being punished, so be careful that your attempts at not rewarding him do not get perceived as a stern sulk.

Plan step 4 – Supervision and crating

As with many behaviour patterns one is trying to correct, every accident is a step back in the training process and may reinforce the unwanted behaviour. It is therefore essential that the puppy gets as little chance as possible to 'mess up'. In training terms, this means that you must 'manage' the behaviour as long as the dog is not reliably house-trained. In practical terms, this is done through a combination of crating and otherwise near -constant supervision.

If you do not sleep close to your puppy, accidents can be mainly expected at night, as that is when he is left unsupervised for the longest. But inevitably, there will be long unsupervised periods somewhere during daytime too. To decrease the chance of an accident while unsupervised:

- Crate him.
- Listen out for whines if you are not in the same room.
- Do not feed after 6 pm (Ref 2: Animed Veterinary Group) or before you are about to go out for hours. Note: This requires planning on your part, of course, as he still needs his meals at regular times. I am not suggesting you starve your puppy because you have to run errands in the morning.

Crate: some background information

The reason the crate is often suggested as a management tool for house-training is that healthy dogs are reluctant to eliminate in their sleeping quarters, thus confining your puppy to a crate when unsupervised decreases the likelihood of an accident inside the house.

I prefer the crate over a puppy pen, training pads, or newspapers as the method does not allow any elimination indoor whatsoever, whereas these alternative methods do, thus blurring the line between 'eliminating outside is OK' and 'eliminating inside is not OK', in my opinion.

Before regularly using the crate, make sure you gradually get him used to it. As with every desensitization protocol, it is essential that you do not push the dog beyond his comfort zone when approaching each next step.

The list below sets out a succinct method for crate-training:

- Put a comfortable blanket in the crate, and a comfort toy. Make sure the blanket and toy are made of solid material made especially for dogs, to reduce the risk that he chews holes through the blanket, or bite pieces off the toy, both potential choking hazards. Also make sure the dog has a little water in his crate (you can buy an integrated water dish for most crates).
- Let him explore the crate at his own pace. If he shows no interest, throw some kibble or a toy in there to encourage exploratory behaviour. Be very casual about the whole affair, as dogs can pick up very subtle signals and some are put off by excessive intensity.
- Now put a chew toy in the cage, like a bone or a Kong. What you need is a toy that he will be busy with for at least a few minutes. If he stays in the cage to chew it, praise gently. If he drags the object out of the cage, put another, even more interesting object in the crate, to encourage him to return. It would help if the object is just too big or awkward in shape to be carried by the pup, as that decreases the motivation to leave the crate. Do stay within eyesight so that he does not immediately associate the crate with your absence.
- Ensuring the chew toy is still in the crate, and once he is comfortable in the crate for a few minutes, close the door (do not lock it yet) for a few seconds, and throw tasty treats inside through the bar. Praise him gently through the bars. Do this just enough so that he knows he's doing well, but not so much that his primary motivation becomes to join you.
- When he is comfortable with the door closed, increase the periods during which he stays in the crate with the door closed (but not locked). Stay within eyesight of the dog. I always take a book or a laptop to eliminate the temptation to go away and make sure my time is productive. It is essential that you look out for subtle signals that the dog wants to be let out, so that at no stage the dog feels out of his comfort zone in the crate.
- When he is comfortable for longer periods, lock the crate for your next few long sessions. Make as little fuss as possible of this, so it stays unimportant event for the dog.
- At this stage, you can work in periods of leaving the dog alone in the crate while you leave the room. Again, it is important to gradually build this up, rather than

leaving the room for long periods immediately. Another noteworthy precaution: do not to make a fuss when you leave or when you return, thus not underlying the distinction between your presence and your absence. Initially, start by waiting in an adjacent room, so that you can hear the slightest sign of unrest in the dog, and let him out before he gets worked up. You can then graduate to leaving the house (again, starting with very brief periods and not making a fuss when you leave and return).

Note: As gradual crate-training can take a few days, or even weeks, and non housebroken dogs cannot be unsupervised all night, you may choose to put him in the crate all night from the first night, thus prior to gradual crate-training. So if you have to have the dog in a crate prior to gradual crate-training, place the crate in your bedroom, so that you can let him out upon subtle signs of discomfort, rather than when the dog is really anxious. This also allows you to time your rewards more accurately for periods of quiet time (gently talking and/or stroking him after 30 seconds of quiet).

Note: Once your dog is crate-trained (i.e. he is comfortable in the crate for long periods), do not leave him alone in the crate for hours on end. The crate is a management tool for temporary absences and should not be used for dogs that are left alone all day.

Note: Even beyond puppyhood and for a reliably house-trained dog, it is always good to keep up crate training. This will make his anxiety a lot more manageable should he go on a plane trip or for a long stay at the vet's surgery, in which case he would be housed in a crate too.

Very important note: Never ever use the crate as a punishment corner. The crate has to be the source of all things good, and devoid of negative associations.

Listen out for whines at night

If you hear him whine at night, get up immediately and let him out. Do not cuddle or play with him. Just praise him if he eliminates and guide him back to his sleeping quarters with minimum fuss.

At night, a commonly occurring problem is the initial difficulty in distinguishing between a dog that just wants to be let out of the crate, and one that genuinely needs to eliminate. One sure way to find out is to gently guide him to an appropriate elimination zone and casually wait a few minutes. If he shows no sign of

eliminating, gently take him back to the crate and give him no attention, as, like a human baby, he needs to get into a routine of minimal interaction at night.

Plan step 5 – Found an accident: how to react

Found evidence after the facts

Not the end of the world

At the beginning, you can expect the odd accident despite your supervision/crating regime. Do not be too despondent if that is the case: it is perfectly normal, and Rome was not built in a day. To avoid getting discouraged, keep track of the general improvement, rather than getting hung up on this setback. Do take every possible measure to avoid it, though, as it may become a self-reinforcing behaviour.

Cleaning up

If you find a puddle or solid waste, do not let the dog see you clean up the mess. I am yet to read the official reason behind this, but my interpretation is that my cleaning activity may be interpreted as reward or punishment signals, the intensity or polarity of which would be entirely beyond my control.

It is important to get rid of the smell as best you can. Dogs having such a powerful sense of smell, it is unrealistic to imagine you shall get rid of the last trace of odour, but, as far as the temptation to eliminate on the same spot is concerned, the less smell the better. Avoid using ammonia-based products, which would only add to the nitric smell. There are plenty of specialist products on the market, but I advise you to either purchase this product at your veterinary practice, or to do a thorough product review survey.

Caught him in the act

Should you catch him in the act, give him a firm (but not startlingly loud) 'no' while moving quickly to interrupt him. Do not physically drag him, but gently lead him to a place more appropriate for elimination. Avoid intimidating him by bending over him, as that would be a rather aversive stimulus. The idea is to (gently) startle him to break the behaviour pattern, not to intimidate him. Once outside, give him a little time (about five minutes) to resume elimination. If he does, praise him and if he does not, gently lead him back inside, neither punishing nor rewarding him.

How long will it take

It is likely you shall be successful during the day sooner than at night, as that is when he spends the longest time unsupervised. At around 13 weeks of age, the puppy should be physically able to 'hold it in' for four hours (Ref 4: Dog Breed Info Center - undated), so that should leave you plenty of room to avoid accidents during daytime. By week 18, your puppy should really be physically able to be reliably housetrained day and night. Bearing that in mind, there is significant dog-dog variation.

Some factors can hinder housebreaking:

- Puppies born in a 'puppy factory' are not always given the chance to practice basic hygiene habits as they are constrained in a cage. This can make it slower to housebreak them, but not impossible. Even adult dogs with housetraining problems can most often be successfully 'cured'.
- The dog may be submission-urinating, or excitement-urination, in which case you should look at what is intimidating or over-exciting the puppy and eliminate that from his environment for a while.
- The dog could be scent-marking. A sign that this is the case is the small quantity sprayed (marking does not create puddles). This behaviour is often seen as male dogs reach adolescence, but even a housetrained neutered male dog can start showing this with no previous history. The onset of marking in an adult dog can be the sign of a disruption in its routine, like a new baby, but it can be caused by something as trivial as the smell of another dog on your clothes. The treatment for this is a period of intense supervision, interrupting him with a (gentle) scold as he is about to mark. This can leave the chance of the dog only marking only when you are absent, in which case you should seek specific treatment advice for this behaviour problem.
- The dog could be (or have become) physically incontinent. This could be old age, but a number of urinary conditions can also cause the onset of uncontrolled urination. So, if your previously housetrained dog is having repeated accidents, it is always best to have your dog checked up by the veterinarian if you have the slightest suspicion that the problem could be physical.

Going even further

Putting elimination on cue

Ian Dunbar advises to put the elimination behaviour on cue (e.g. 'go potty!'). This is immensely practical when you are in a rush, if you do not want to stand endlessly in the rain, if you need a stool or urine sample, or to give the cue close to a bin (thus avoid walking for hundreds of meters with a filled scooper bag). I personally have found this to be rather difficult and have never persevered long enough to reap the results. As practical as it is, I also question our right to regulate a dog's elimination routine to the nearest second for our convenience.

Jean Donaldson (Ref 5: Donaldson, Jean - 1996) speculated that the difficulty in this was because the beginning of the elimination behaviour is actually invisible to you, so it is difficult to time the (voice) reward just right.

Eliminating in a particular spot only

It is also possible to train your dog to only eliminate in a particular spot in the yard, rather than in the whole garden. Unless you approach this from the onset, this can be a rather subtle training task in terms of grading different reward at the right intensity. Indeed, the dog must still occasionally be praised for eliminating outside (to distinguish it from eliminating inside), but you now also need to add extra praise for eliminating in THE spot in the garden.

There is also the risk that the dog is delayed in understanding that eliminating outside is OK, if you have to say no on the forbidden spot. The distinction between inside and outside is a lot easier to a dog than between your beloved bed of roses and the 'pee bushes'.

To help you in the task of teaching spot-urinating in your yard, you could buy a gadget that is allegedly treated with pheromone: a 'pee post'. Be warned, though: reviews on their efficacy of this product are mixed. You could also take the reverse route, and spray all the forbidden areas in the garden with cayenne pepper (repeating after a rain shower). Again, this method is reported to have varying degrees of success, including downright ineffectiveness.

Our own arrangement

We are lucky enough to have a totally enclosed garden (minimising the risk of burglary), so we have set up a 'dog-flap' so the dog has constant on-demand access to the garden. One small disadvantage is that you have to clean up your dog's mess in the garden (but I would do that on the street anyway). The bigger risk is that your dog loses its ability/willingness to hold it in for long periods, so you might run into problems if you are lodging at someone else's house with your dog.

Note: If you are thinking of this arrangement, please first potty-train your dog so that he is familiar with the principle of 'outside is OK' and 'inside is not'.

Note: You would need to 'flap-train' your dog so that he learns to use the door. The detailed steps for this go beyond the scope of this essay, but it can easily be taught in a few days.

Note: When purchasing a dog-flap for a puppy, please install a flap designed for the dog's adult size, not his current size. This may seem obvious, but it can be a particularly awkward decision for owners of a mixed breed puppy of uncertain lineage.

Conclusion

There are countless methods of potty training for puppies. Whatever method one chooses to follow, the essential point is to avoid old-fashioned punishment-based methods like the infamous 'rubbing the dog's nose in it'. As with many training endeavours, it is handled most efficiently and with the least upset through well-timed positive reinforcement, management and desensitisation (for crate-training). Management may seem a heavy burden at the beginning, but a well-founded regime at the beginning is a lot less painful than a dog that is unreliably continent in the long run.

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