



Maplewood Dog Training

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House Breaking Your Dog

by Katrin Andberg

Teaching your young puppy, or newly adopted adult dog, that he is to toilet only in a spot designated by you is a task that all new owners face. When broken down into steps, this is a simple, though not necessarily easy, behavior pattern to teach a dog of any age.

What is a “House Broken Dog?”

First let us break down and define exactly what having a “house broken” dog means. The end definition of a dog that is solidly trained to only toilet in a spot designated by their owner’s, is a dog that can control their bladder or bowels, to not relieve until he has reached the designated spot. This means that the dog will actively hold his bladder or bowels, despite needing to void, until he is outside in the designated area.

In order to meet this definition, a dog must be of the age and health that he can physically hold it and resist the urge to void immediately. **Generally, dogs cannot physically begin to control their sphincter muscles in this manner until at minimum age 5-6 months.** It is important to remember, that dogs of this age are just beginning to understand the concept of “holding it” despite needing to void, so it is generally unrealistic to expect them to fully grasp and be able to replicate the effort of “holding it” until age 10-12 months. One thing we remind our clients is that when toilet training a human child you generally begin when they are age 2-3 years old, but most parents understand that they cannot consider their child “reliable” with toilet training until age 6 or older. While dogs develop and mature on a much quicker time scale than human children, the comparison is still quite valid. You wouldn’t expect your 5 year old human child to be 100% reliable with bathroom habits, it isn’t reasonable to expect it of your 5 month old dog either. For older dogs that are having issues with relieving in inappropriate places, the best first step is always a thorough health check with urinalysis and fecal by a licensed veterinarian to ensure that there is no medical cause for the toileting problems.

A “house broken dog” also means that the dog has generalized the concept of not relieving where he eats, sleeps or plays, to the entire house he lives in and also to other indoor areas. Most dogs do not generalize concepts well, which is why many owners report that their dog will ‘sit’ or ‘down’ at home in the kitchen, but not at the ball field when watching their child’s baseball game. The dog has not generalized that the ‘sit’ cue and action of sitting are the same in the greater world as they are at home. **Most dogs are not capable of fully generalizing your entire home as a place where they eat, sleep or play, until they are 1 year of age. Most dogs will not begin to actively signal to their owners that they need to toilet, until they are 1 year old.** In order to assist dogs in generalizing this concept of not relieving where he eats, sleeps or plays, we recommend

that you utilize some form of confinement for your dog, be that a crate or a small room such as a bathroom or laundry room.

[A Confinement Area as a Training Aid in House Breaking](#)

When you are utilizing a confinement area as a training aid in teaching your dog the concept to not void where he eats, sleeps or plays, you want the area small enough that your dog can comfortably stand or lie down, but not so large that he can avoid an area where he has urinated or defecated. In order to create an area of that small size, most people find the most cost effective way is to purchase a dog crate. Crates come in many varieties, hard plastic, wire or cloth, and can be purchase at most pet stores or on-line. Generally for routine use we recommend a hard plastic or wire crate.

When using a confining space to assist in house breaking, you never want to use the space as a punishment area. Your dog's confinement area should be a positive place where he can relax and take a break. It should also be an area where he can go to safely get away from the often times chaotic hub-ub of the modern family environment. If you ever observe an adult dog, often times you will find the dog resting or napping in natural "crate-like" places such as underneath the dining room table or coffee table, under a bed, or in a closet or other confining area. Dogs often times enjoy feeling the protection that enclosed spaces brings them. One simple way to ensure that your dog finds his confinement area to be a safe, positive place is to feed him at least one meal per day in that area. Another way is to give your dog a small food treat or a special chew toy every time you put him in the confinement area.

To assist with house breaking, you will want to make use of your dog's confinement area when you are not home, at night when you go to bed, and whenever you cannot be fully attentive to supervising your dog when you are home. The confinement area gives you the freedom to go about your daily life, while ensuring that your dog doesn't have any unwanted accidents in your home. Giving your dog too much access and freedom to unconfined spaces too quickly in the house breaking process, will result in your dog learning that relieving himself inside your home is acceptable. **We recommend that families make use of a confinement area when they are not home, at night and when they are not supervising their dog until the dog has reached a minimum of 2 years old.**

When you are home, and would like to give your dog some supervised freedom from his confinement area, we recommend the use of a tether system. A tether system can be as simple as a leash tied around your waist that physically attaches you to your dog while you are home. A tether system can also involve a leash or wire tie-down, that you attach to a piece of furniture or wall in your home, to create a smaller area the dog can be confined to while still enjoying being out in the larger house area. **Using a tether system is an excellent way to begin to teach your dog that he is to signal to you that he needs to toilet.** By physically attaching your dog to you, you will quickly begin to pick up on his signals when he needs to relieve.

A common problem that families report in house breaking their dog, is that the dog will stay in the room with them playing, then leave the room and go to another part of the house and relieve himself. Again this problem area is due to your dog not generalizing the concept that he is not to void where he eats, sleeps or plays to the entire house. A tether system helps to interrupt this behavior pattern or prevent it from forming to begin with.

The House Breaking Schedule

When you have a young puppy or newly adopted adult dog in the home, generally problems with house breaking start as a scheduling problem. Your dog joins your family on a relieving schedule that is off-kilter from the one that your family would prefer he have. In order to successfully prevent accidents inside your home, you need to transition the dog onto whatever relieving schedule your family would prefer. **The rule of thumb for dogs under age 6 months, is a dog can hold his bladder or bowels for as many hours as he is months old.** This means that a 2 month old dog can comfortably hold it for 2 hours during day light hours. **Most dogs can comfortably hold his bladder or bowels approximately 2 to 3 times the length of time that they are months old overnight.** So a 2 month old dog can comfortably hold it for 4-6 hours overnight. **To ensure that your dog can comfortably hold it overnight, it is recommended that you remove your dog's access to food and water at least 3-4 hours before you go to bed.** You do not want to ask any dog, of any age, to hold his bowels or bladder longer than 6-8 hours at a time.

When getting your dog on a relieving schedule there are some important things to remember. **Most dogs under age 6 months need to void their bladder about 10-15 minutes after drinking water, after vigorous play or exercise, and after waking up from sleeping. Most dogs under age 6 months need to void their bowels 20-60 minutes after eating.** When you have a new adult dog in your home, until you learn the dog's intake and output patterns, following the above rules for taking your dog outside to relieve, is an excellent way to ensure that your dog doesn't have any unwanted accidents in your home.

When you take your dog outside to relieve, it is critical that you go outside with your dog on leash, and supervise him actually toileting. You need to ensure that he has actually voided outside before you allow him back inside of the house. The simplest way to teach a dog to void their bladder or bowels on leash is to take him outside on a 4 or 6' leash to the designated relieving spot. Stand in one spot, and allow the dog the opportunity to relieve for 5-10 minutes. If the dog does relieve outside, praise him and allow him some supervised freedom inside the home, play with him outside or take him for a walk. If the dog does not void in that 5-10 minute period, bring him back inside and put him in his confinement area. Leave him in his confinement area for 20-30 minutes, and then take him back outside on leash to the relieving area for 5-10 minutes. If he relieves, praise and then have some rewarding fun time with him. If he doesn't go, put him back

in the confinement area for 20-30 minutes. Repeat taking him outside on leash for 5-10 minutes, then confinement area for 20-30 minutes until he successfully relieves outside in the designated area.

We recommend that when you take your dog outside to relieve on leash, you begin to incorporate teaching your dog to relieve on cue. For many people this cue is, “Hurry up,” or “Go potty,” or “Get busy.” You want a cue that you and your family find easy to remember. Having a dog eliminate on cue can often times make relieving your dog significantly simpler and faster. Rather than have to wait 20min while you walk your dog around your neighborhood, you simply take your dog to the spot where you wish him to relieve and give the cue. This also makes getting your dog to relieve when you take him to a new area, such as a highway rest stop parking area or a hotel parking lot when you are traveling or on vacation, significantly simpler. To teach your dog to relieve on cue, begin by giving the cue as your dog is eliminating. When your dog is in the act of eliminating quietly give the cue and praise him as he finishes. Once your dog begins to associate the act of voiding with the cue, generally after a few weeks, begin saying the cue when you want him to relieve.

To teach your dog not to have a shy bladder, also be sure to teach your dog to relieve on various surfaces. Grass is not always readily available in the modern world, so it is a wise decision to teach your dog to eliminate on various substrates such as concrete, gravel and dirt.

A guideline relieving schedule for a 2 month old puppy would be as follows:

6am: Take puppy out of confinement area and immediately take outside to relieving area

6:30am: Feed puppy in confinement area and give him a drink of water

6:45am: Take puppy outside to relieving area

7:30am: Take puppy outside to relieving area to see if he needs to defecate from breakfast

7:30am: Take puppy outside to relieving area every 2 hours, or after puppy drinks water, wakes up from a nap, or plays

12pm: Feed puppy and give him a drink of water

12:15pm: Take puppy outside to relieving area

1pm: Take puppy outside to relieving area to see if he needs to defecate from lunch

1-5:30pm: Take puppy outside to relieving area every 2 hours, or after puppy drinks water, wakes up from a nap, or plays

5:30pm: Feed puppy and give him a drink of water

5:45pm: Take puppy outside to relieving area

6pm: Remove puppy’s access to food and water

6:30pm: Take puppy outside to see if he needs to defecate from dinner

6:30pm to 9:30pm: Take puppy outside to relieving area every 2 hours, or after puppy drinks water, wakes up from a nap, or plays

9:30pm: Put puppy in confinement area for bed

1am: Take puppy outside to relieving area

Remember that between the times you are taking your dog outside to relieve, the key to preventing toileting in the house is supervision. If you are not 100% supervising your dog, he needs to be on a tether system or in his confinement area.

What to do if Your Dog Has a Toileting Accident in the House

If your dog has a toileting accident in the house, somewhere there was a breakdown in supervision.

With house breaking, supervision and prevention of inappropriate elimination inside the home is the critical key to success. Again, if you are not able to 100% supervise and prevent your dog from having an accident in the house, he needs to be on a tether system or in his confinement area.

If your dog relieves in the house and you catch him in the process of relieving himself, immediately interrupt him and take him outside to the designated relieving area. If he finishes relieving outside, praise him profusely and tell him what a wonderful dog he is for going outside. Once he has finished outside, bring him back in the house, and quietly clean up the mess inside with an enzymatic cleaner. **When cleaning up relieving accidents indoors, it is critical that you utilize a specially formulated enzymatic cleaner that will remove all trace urine and fecal elements that your dog is able to smell.** The enzymes in the cleaner will break down all remaining scent, making your dog less likely to want to relieve in that spot repeatedly. The most commonly used enzymatic cleaner is called Nature's Miracle. **If your dog has previously voided himself in an area of your home, to detect the trace elements that your dog can smell, look over the area with a black light.** Where ever the black light illuminates, your dog can smell urine or feces and is more likely to void again in that spot. Clean the area thoroughly with the enzymatic cleaner until the black light no longer illuminates the area. Be sure to check along the baseboards and up walls if you have a male dog.

Dogs cannot mentally link cause and effect beyond 3 seconds. This scientifically proven fact is why it does your house breaking efforts no good and your relationship with your dog much harm, to in any way correct your dog for a relieving accident in the house. Rubbing your dog's nose in an accident he has had in the house, does nothing to prevent your dog from having future accidents and only teaches him to avoid you when you are angry. **If you find a past accident in the house from your dog, all you can do is clean it well with an enzymatic cleaner and redouble your efforts at supervision when your dog has freedom in the house.**

In summary, successfully house breaking your dog requires conscious effort in taking your dog outside on a relieving schedule, the use of a well designed confinement area, and copious amounts of supervision. With some active thought, patience and practice you and your dog can be successful in house breaking and you will be well on your way to having a positive, well founded relationship with your new canine companion.