



Pet Health Information from Milford Animal Clinic

Canine Training & Housebreaking

The following steps are designed to help you begin training and housebreaking any dog. They are divided into two sections: puppies and older dogs.

Puppies

Puppies become adept at interacting with other dogs between the ages of 4 and 8+ weeks and with people, between the ages of 5 and 10 weeks. They learn to explore new surroundings between 5 and 16 weeks, and if they are not exposed to these by about 10 weeks of age they can become neophobic (fearful of the unfamiliar). This means that dogs that miss these “socialization” or sensitive interaction periods do not necessarily develop problems associated with that lack of experience, but they may be more at risk for such problems. The following recommendations are designed to minimize risk. Accordingly, in the first 2 months that you have the puppy, you should make sure that the pup interacts with other dogs and people of all ages and sexes, experiences cars and traffic noises, meets other animals it lives with such as farm animals, and gets accustomed to environments in which the adult dog is expected, by you, to function. If you intend to show the dog, take the pup to shows early, even before it is old enough to be entered.

The best time to start training a dog to eliminate in a desired location is when the puppy is between 7 ½ and 8 ½ weeks of age. This is when the puppy is best able to start to choose a preferred substrate and to act on that choice. This does not mean that the puppy will not have accidents after that time: it will, but the foundations for easier housebreaking are best laid at the age.

Some puppies are not as developmentally advanced as others at the same age and may do well forming a preference for an area for urination and defecation but may not have the physical muscle and nervous control necessary for extended periods without accidents. There is much variation in the rates at which puppies develop, just as with human children. This control comes with age if the puppy is appropriately reinforced and if there is no physical problem.

If you have truly done everything “right” and the 6- to 9-month-old puppy is still not completely housebroken, it is important to look for an underlying medical problem, such as an infection, that may be contributing to or causing the problem. Sometimes, a slight amount of dribbling, particularly if the dog is excited, can be normal. For example, although not true for every dog, it is not uncommon for female puppies to dribble urine because of some of the hormonal and anatomical differences that distinguish them from male dogs. This usually improves with age, but in some cases when it does not, the puppy may respond to the hormones that become abundant during an estrous or heat cycle. This usually starts at about 9 months of age and continues about every 6 months if the puppy is not spayed or neutered (ovariohysterectomized).

A word on spaying and castration is in order. Spayed pets are healthier pets. They are less likely to roam, are not at risk of dying of uterine infections or unintended pregnancies, and have a greatly decreased risk of mammary cancer if spayed no later than 1 ½ years of age. If the decision is made to allow the puppy to have a heat cycle, the owner is absolutely responsible for always keeping the puppy on a leash, in sight, and away from male dogs for the extended period before, during, and after the actual discharge phase of the cycle. Otherwise the puppy *will* become pregnant. Fifteen to 20 million unwanted pets are killed annually in humane shelters in the United States. No one needs any unwanted and unplanned puppies, and it is an unkindness to allow a *puppy* to bear puppies. Even if the dog is a superior quality breeding dog, no responsible breeder would encourage or allow a *puppy* to be bred and have babies.

Castration is also an excellent idea for male puppies that are not to be bred. They fight less with other dogs, they urine-mark less frequently, they roam less, and they are healthier. If your dog is not an absolutely top-quality breeding animal (i.e., all parents and grandparents are free of any genetic disease or problem, its temperament and those of its parents and grandparents are flawless, and its pedigree is liberally sprinkled with champions), *do*



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not breed the animal; neuter it. This is a kindness. Most of the dogs brought to humane shelters are purebred dogs, and 60% of all breeding results in the death of either the mother or one or more of the puppies.

With these considerations in mind, barring any physical problems, housebreaking a puppy is time consuming because it requires attention to the puppy's signals and consistent action, but it is much easier than trying to correct inappropriate elimination behaviors that could have been avoided by the right approach at the start.

Crates

Decide whether you will crate-train the puppy. This is generally an excellent idea for most puppies and can be an essential step in the housetraining process. Small, enclosed areas encourage the pup to develop conscious muscle control to inhibit elimination at inconvenient times.

Crates are available from pet stores, online stores, big box stores and some kennel clubs that may rent them. If you are planning to travel with the pet, buy a crate. Airlines require it, and you can even check in to some of the finest hotels if you are willing to crate the dog.

Some pups immediately feel more secure when left alone in a crate with blankets, toys, food, water, and, if the crate is large enough, an area for paper urination and defecation. Get a bigger crate if the pup will spend all day in it. Young (8-week-old) puppies need to eliminate every hour (more if eating, playing or just awakening) and will need an area they can start to use for this. If the crate is small, an older puppy will be unlikely to soil it; however, no puppy can be expected to last 8 to 10 hours without urinating or defecating.

Crates should always be placed in family areas, not in the damp, dark basement or garage. You want the puppy to learn to love going into the crate. Feed the puppy in the crate with the door open: ask the puppy to sit and wait, put the food inside, and release the puppy. Teach the puppy to wait to go into the crate by using biscuits to reward the dog for restraint. Correctly *reward* with treats or toys; *do not bribe*. Remember, a bribe is an action taken to lure an animal away from an undesirable behavior that rewards the animal a priori; a reward is an action taken a posteriori when the animal has willingly complied with a request. A reward is a salary; a bribe is blackmail.

Each day give the puppy a toy, a blanket, and something to chew (a biscuit, a big sterilized bone that has been stuffed with peanut butter, a Nylabone or a KONG toy stuffed with peanut butter) and put the puppy into the crate for some quiet time. This is quiet time for all of you and will provide you with the ability to give the dog a safe place to relax and calm down ("time out") whenever the puppy is driving you crazy and you do not have the patience to work with the pup. Puppies are babies and need their own quiet time, too. During these short (5 to 10 minute to start) sessions, stay quietly in the room with the pup, but do not respond to attempts to get your attention. The puppy is capable of amusing itself. As the pup becomes more accustomed to the crate, extend the period of time that the dog is in it and go to other areas of the house. Before you release the pup from the crate, ask the pup to sit. When the pup does sit, praise it. When the puppy is let out of the crate, do not fuss over the pup for a few minutes or it could learn to associate release from the crate with lots of attention. Do this later after the pup has performed a few "sits" and "downs" for you.

The crate should be kept clean. If it is soiled, use hot water and nonirritating soap or baking soda and vinegar and rinse well and dry. Use an odor neutralizer. Crates should be placed in well-lit areas but not where they will get the heat of the afternoon sun – the puppy could easily overheat and die. Timers can be used on lights so that the pup is not left alone in the dark. Radios and televisions can be turned on for auditory company and to mask scary street sounds ("white noise").

Never leave anything around the pup's neck (a loose or choker collar) that can tangle and hang on any part of the cage or anything in it. The puppy could strangle and die a painful death.



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The crate has three main purposes:

1. To encourage the dog to start inhibiting the urge to eliminate.
2. To keep the puppy safe from all the disasters from electric cords to toxic substances that lurk in the average home.
3. To keep you sane when the puppy is too rambunctious. Puppies *are* rambunctious. They need an *aerobic* outlet for their energy. The crate is *not* meant to keep them incarcerated or to substitute for that need for aerobic exercise. Do not think that you can keep the puppy in the crate for 8 to 10 hours per day and then not have to play energetic games at night. If you need an animal you can keep caged for most of its young life, consider a gerbil.

Alternatives to Crates

If you are not going to crate your puppy, confine it to one area (kitchen, den, sunporch) at first. This gives the dog a greater sense of security when you are not home and minimizes damage. Leave a radio and a light on for the pup. Expand the areas to which the pup has access gradually, only when the puppy has not eliminated or destroyed anything in the area to which it was previously confined. Baby gates are useful. If you will be gone for more than 2 to 3 hours, the puppy will have to urinate or defecate and you must provide the pup with an area to do this (litter box or newspaper, see following discussion). Make sure that the room is puppy-proof: no cupboards with chemicals or toxic substances that the dog can enter; no strings, ropes, slippers, magazines, or mail the dog can shred or ingest and possibly cause an intestinal obstruction. As with a crate, the dog should have a blanket, water, toys and a few biscuits. Caution is urged in confining puppies to bathrooms, where they have been known to drown in toilets, or in kitchens if they can reach and turn on the stove accidentally.

Elimination Paradigm

Puppies develop substrate preferences for urination and defecation. This means that if you teach a dog to urinate on newspaper, the pup will learn to seek out that substrate. This can be a problem if you have not finished reading the newspaper and place the unread section on the floor. Although it is more difficult to teach a puppy to go outside to urinate and defecate after it has learned to use newspaper, it is not impossible. It is preferable to teach the dog to go outside at the outset, but this may not fit your schedule. The following are options.

1. Take the puppy outside every 1 to 2 hours. Puppies have high metabolisms and small bladders. Let the puppy sniff a bit, do not just pull the pup and keep walking. Sniffing is an important part of the elimination sequence in dogs. If the dog is just rampantly plowing ahead sniffing, instead, stop and walk quickly back and forth. *Do not jerk the dog.* Sensibly walk the puppy with a head collar or harness. Use a short rather than extendable lead so that you can quickly correct the dog and respond to its cues. This movement simulates normal dog elimination precursor behavior. The pup will eventually squat – pay attention and praise it. When the dog is finished, tell the pup that it is brilliant. You can give the pup a little piece of biscuit as it squats on a desired substrate (grass); this may help encourage the association between squatting on that substrate and good experiences.



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2. Regardless of the frequency of your other walks, take the pup out 15 to 45 minutes after each time it eats. These are the range of times that it takes after food is eaten for the intestine to be stimulated. "Food" includes biscuits and rawhides, both of which stimulate elimination. Watch for behaviors that tell you the dog may be ready (pacing, whining, circling, a sudden stopping of another behavior) and intercept the animal. If you pick the pup up and it starts to leak or the act of picking up the pup starts the leak, get a cloth and clamp it to the pup's genitals. This will stimulate the pup to associate inhibition of elimination with those muscle groups. It also keeps the floor cleaner. Again praise the dog as it is squatting and *immediately* after it has finished.
3. Take the puppy out immediately after any play *and* nap or after it has awakened at night. If this is the first walk of the day, put your clothes on and have your cloth ready before you even approach the crate.
4. If you must train the pup to eliminate on paper or in a litter box, put the box or paper in one place, preferably close to a door. Take the puppy to the paper frequently and praise the pup if it squats. You may want to put heavy-gauge plastic under the newspaper to protect the underlying substrate in case the pup misses or the urine soaks through the paper. Getting the puppy outdoors still requires you to be home for a while. While the dog is being trained to paper, you still must take it out at least three or four times a day (after meals, awakening and play). Praise the puppy immediately during and after the squat. To wean the puppy from the paper, gradually start to move the paper 1 to 2 inches per day closer to the door. Spy on the puppy during weekends and, as it begins to squat on the paper, rush outside and wait for the dog to urinate or defecate. This also helps stop the dog from being fearful outside. Praise the pup in excess. Paper training may slow the process of getting the puppy to develop an outdoor substrate preference but may be your only option. Some people with small dogs elect to have the dog permanently trained to paper or a litter box. That is easier for small dogs and fine if it works for you, but if you do not want the dog to rely on those devices, you must go through the amount of work described here.
5. If you have an older dog that is housebroken, take it with you when you take the pup out. Dogs learn very well by observing, and this may speed up the process.
6. Dogs are generally faster to housebreak for defecation than urination. This may be related in part to the fact that puppies urinate more frequently than they defecate. For some very "clueless" dogs, it can help to take either a urine-soaked sponge or a piece of feces to the area you would prefer the pup to use. This may help the animal learn to associate its scent pattern with the area, but it cannot be used in the absence of the other steps previously mentioned.
7. For puppies that are older (7 to 9 months) and still seem to have no awareness of appropriate elimination behavior, diapers can help. This is *not* a substitute for the process previously described, but an addition. Dog diapers or britches are available at pet care outlets and are sold primarily for females in season (heat). The uncomfortable sensation of a damp diaper next to the skin helps teach some dogs to inhibit themselves. You must be willing to bathe and powder any dogs that might soil themselves to prevent urine burns or fecal contamination. A thin layer of petroleum jelly can help provide a protective coating.

In addition to all these steps, it is important to note that even if you have 120 acres and the dog will have free range, you need to be standing next to the dog, rewarding it for eliminating on an appropriate substrate, or the association will *not be made*. It is not acceptable to do this through a window or when the pup comes back in. Free-range dogs learn to eliminate anywhere. This is not what you want.

Reward the puppy with a longer walk and more play outside after it eliminates. Do not play with the puppy or allow it to play with other dogs before it eliminates. If the only time that the pup has to watch the air, chase leaves, and hear birds is when it is outside to eliminate, you may be worsening your housebreaking problems. If the pup is brought back in right after eliminating, the dog can learn both to avoid or postpone elimination outside and to save walks for exploration. After all, the pup can always eliminate indoors.



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Finally, if you want your dog to start to learn to eliminate on command, give the command, and no other interaction, until the pup does it. Say “empty” or “go pee”, and make sure that your last command coincides with a squatting event. Then tell the dog it is brilliant. Use this with play after elimination and your pup will be more than willing to do your bidding.

Punishment

You will notice that no mention of punishment for housebreaking has been made because punishment has virtually no role in housebreaking a dog. Animals and people make associations between act and consequences, this is how we learn. Finding a puddle of urine in the rug and dog cringing *does not* mean that the dog knows it has erred. This action probably means that this has happened before: you have come home, grabbed the dog, dragged the dog to the urine, and hit the dog. The dog *has* made an association: you come home and the dog gets hit, but it is the wrong association (or at least one you did not intend for the dog to learn). In fact, if you have punished the pup, the pup probably cringes when you come home even if it has not urinated on the rug, but you do not notice.

You *must* couple the correction exactly with the action that needs correcting. If you see the puppy start to squat (preferably) or in the act of urinating or defecating on the rug, *startle it*: a sharp “no,” coupled with a loud noise (clapping of hands, banging of a pot, blasting a foghorn) will startle the pup. Use the lowest level of stimulus necessary to achieve the startle. For some very meek pups this might just be saying “Shame!” The concept of shame probably does not exist for dogs, but your tone of voice will be very potent. The startle merely interrupts the behavior and gives you a chance to reinforce a better behavior. After the pup is startled, grab the pup and take it outside, praising the pup when it urinates or defecates on an appropriate substrate. Psychologists have shown that we learn best and most quickly when surprised, thus startling the dog with an unpleasant stimulus when you catch it in the act is the best way to teach association of unpleasant actions with eliminating in the wrong place.

There is *never* any excuse to hit or beat a dog.

Early Training

No puppy is too young to learn to earn what it wants by sitting and staying. All pups should be taught to sit and stay for walks, food dishes, water, play attention – anything. The fastest way to teach this is with food treats – tiny pieces of biscuits, treats, jerky, or even cheese. This technique allows you to use only voice commands so that your moving hands do not distract the pup. Later you can add hand signals and other cues. The puppy will accidentally sit the first time: hold the treat in one hand in front of the dog’s nose, gradually move it close to the ground and repeat “sit” until its bottom is on the ground. *Instantly* open your hand for the treat and say “good pup”. As the puppy matures you can begin to expect it to distinguish between “sit” and “down” by using those words to mean only what they say; at first, the pup only has to get its bottom on the ground. At first, use the words “sit” and “down” to mean exactly that, but reward the pup if it does either; reinforce the dog to distinguish between the commands by being particularly enthusiastic if it does so. You will gradually shape the behavior. Later, as the pup is more mature, you only reward it for “down” when it lies down and “sit” when it sits instead of lying down. The earlier you start to teach a dog to look to you for cues and to defer to you for anything it desires, the better. All dogs should be taught discipline, manners, and to respond to owners’ requests. This is particularly true for large-breed dogs that can be unpleasant, at best, and dangerous, at worst when out of control. No dog needs to be hit or otherwise physically or verbally abused to learn to do this.



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Older Dogs

The same basic training and housebreaking rules apply for older dogs, but older dogs can be more difficult to housebreak because they may have to unlearn some less favorable behaviors. Older puppies or dogs who have been in kennels for extensive periods may have developed a preference for the substrate on which they were kept.

While doing all of the previously mentioned exercises, you must be very vigilant whenever the dog is around substrates it has used in the past. Expect to do a lot of monitoring and correcting. Spying on the dog can be made easier by putting a bell on the dog's collar. Incarcerate the dog any time you cannot monitor it. *Be patient.* If you have ever tried to lose 5 pounds, you know how hard it is to break a habit.

Put a cow bell, sleigh bells or jingle bells on a string by the door and teach the dog that when it bats the bell, you open the door and let it out. Demonstrate this the first few times by taking the dog's paw and saying "knock," and whacking the bells. Then tell the dog "good dog" and let it out. This process will give you an auditory cue for when the dog has to go outside so that you can further reinforce the good behavior. You must be willing to take the dog out every time that the bell rings when you are home. Dogs can learn not to ring when you are not there. You can hasten this learning by placing the bells on the door only when you are home and removing them when you are not home. This is also a useful technique for older puppies.

On the positive side, these older dogs are usually so grateful that they were rescued and can now be loved they will work wonderfully for praise and interaction. Use this.

Checklist for Housebreaking a Puppy

- 1. Put bells on the puppy so you know where it is at all times; this way you can interrupt and correct it
- 2. Crate the puppy
- 3. Take the puppy to a desired area:
 - immediately on awakening
 - immediately after playing (especially if the puppy voluntarily slows after play)
 - 15 to 30 minutes after any food
 - minimum of 6 to 8 times per day
 - every 1 to 2 hours optimal
- 4. Restrict the puppy's access
- 5. Maintain regular feeding times and no free access and take up food after 30 minutes
- 6. Walk the puppy on a leash!
- 7. Do not allow play until the puppy has eliminated
- 8. Take 15- to 20-minute walks



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- 9. Permit sniffing
- 10. Concentrate in one area – take small steps
- 11. Allow play and interaction after elimination
- 12. Reward the puppy after elimination
- 13. Appropriate corrections – startle
- 14. Reinforce scent (older dog, feces in correct area)
- 15. Use a variety of substrates (show or traveling dogs)
- 16. Use vocal commands (empty, potty, go pee)
- 17. Be patient
- 18. Use odor eliminators and appropriate cleaning
- 19. Provide nonelimination-associated aerobic play

Checklist for Housebreaking an Older Dog

- 1. See puppy checklist
- 2. Identify preferred substrate
- 3. Gradually switch preferred substrate
- 4. Concentrate on rewarding appropriate behavior
- 5. Startle when caught in the act
- 6. Crate – use natural inhibition
- 7. Short lead for leash corrections
- 8. Walk and reinforce the dog frequently; teach dog how to “knock” at door using a bell, for example