

Potty Training 101



The endeavor formerly known as “housebreaking” has a new name, and a new mentality. Once seen as a battle of bladder and will, potty training can now be seen in its true light: as **just another training exercise** in which control of reinforcement is tantamount to success. Understanding reinforcement in the context of potty training, and knowing how to control and enhance that reinforcement, is the key to a long and happy relationship with your dog. (Importantly, poor elimination habits is one of the most often

cited reasons for the relinquishment of dogs to shelters - don't let your dog become a statistic: potty train him now, using the same techniques you have learned to train other skills and behaviors!)

First, prevent: As noted in the **Understanding Reinforcement** section of the your Orientation Booklet, elimination is a self-reinforcing behavior; that is, the puppy feels a tremendous pressure to eliminate, does so in the most convenient (for him) spot, and then experiences bodily (and perhaps mental) relief. Nothing that you do after the fact can ever take away the reinforcement that happens in the moment the puppy lets go; and since **reinforcement always increases behavior**, elimination in that spot (or other similar spots) will continue. And if you only half-heartedly prevent your puppy's inappropriate elimination, so that he **sometimes** eliminates in the house even if he **mostly** eliminates outside, his indoor-pottying is then simply on a **variable reinforcement schedule** (i.e. the slot machine), meaning this behavior will certainly grow stronger and more resilient!

- Your puppy needs an elimination schedule! Become “regular” with him: take him out **on-lead** often and at regular intervals throughout the day, particularly upon waking, after meals, and during and after play, so that he has ample opportunity to relieve himself in the appropriate location.
- Confine your puppy to a crate or safe-room when you are unable to devote your attention to him. Though social interaction and enrichment are of utmost importance to your puppy's development, sometimes it will be necessary for you to leave him on his own. A crate big enough for comfort, but small enough to proscribe its use as both a bed and a toilet, or a safe-room equipped with potty-pads separate from the pup's living area, prevent your puppy from receiving internal reinforcement for incorrect behavior. Use them well!

- When you are puttering around the house and can devote some of your attention to your puppy, keep him safely by your side (and thus prevent more than just inappropriate elimination habits) by tethering your pup to you: slip a belt through the loop at the end of your dog's leash, and then fasten the belt around your waist. Watch for your pup to signal his need to go, and head outside to finish the rest of the equation!



Second, replace: When you are fairly certain your pup needs to eliminate, take him to his potty-spot on-lead, and stand quietly with him until he relieves himself.

- Take him on-lead so that he learns to eliminate first and play later.
- Stay with him so that you can reinforce him the moment he behaves appropriately. (Your external reinforcement will enhance your pup's own internal reinforcement, serving to strengthen his desire to potty in the right spot!).
- Once he has relieved himself, spend some time playing outside with your puppy - he has earned that bit of extra reinforcement, and you should reinforce your own patience with a little downtime as well!
- Put pottying on cue by simply saying the cue, one time, pleasantly, just before your puppy begins to relieve himself. Pups who potty on cue are an asset on cold or rainy nights!
- If your puppy doesn't eliminate, take him back inside and confine him in his crate or safe-room for twenty to thirty minutes, and then try again until he is able to go. Don't put pressure on your pup, though - he will go when he is able, and pressure will only make a shy bladder into a veritable wallflower, shrinking from observation and challenging even the patience of Job.

As your pup learns to control his elimination habits, and becomes more skilled at signaling you of his need, you can begin gradually to increase his freedom in your home. Expand his area of confinement as he can tolerate, and never leave him alone so long that he has no choice but to relieve himself inappropriately. For further pointers on **Potty Training 101**, read the excellent booklet titled [Way to go! How to Housetrain a Dog of Any Age](#) by Drs. Karen B. London and Patricia B. McConnell.