

Houstraining: The Best Way. The Only Way.

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Properly houstraining your puppy will save his life.

That's not a joke. Many dogs are surrendered at shelters mainly because they aren't properly houstrained -- by very well-meaning, kind owners just like you.

Why? Well, first he has "accidents" on your carpets and floors. So you start putting him outside. Outside, he barks and digs up the yard. So you put him in the basement. Down there, he's miserable, lonely, destructive, loud, woefully under exercised, and oh yes, did I mention lonely? Now you think maybe this dog thing wasn't such a good idea after all.

Do not be fooled if your puppy happens to get it right for the first few weeks. Regression is absolutely normal and expected. Stay vigilant until he's at least 6 months old.

Houstraining isn't great fun, but it is crucial, and it's crucial that you start it as soon as you get your puppy. It gives you the dog you always dreamed of - the one living peacefully by your side in your home.

How to houstrain your puppy in 3 easy and positive steps:

Step 1: On the first 2-3 days, leash your pup and take him outside (preferably to the same spot) every hour and wait for him to relieve himself. Be boring and don't move. Just allow him the length of his 4-6 foot leash. Don't walk him. As soon as he eliminates, praise, praise, praise while you give him a few pieces of his puppy food and pet him, hug him, kiss him, and award him with the "prize" of a walk around the block and/or off-leash playtime with you if you have a fenced yard. After his elimination and his walk/playtime, he gets 20 minutes of supervised off-leash inside time (this is a great time to play and/or train him). Then he goes into the crate for 35 minutes. Repeat.

If you waited outside with him on leash for more than 20 minutes and he did not relieve himself, he goes directly into the crate for another 20 minutes, then straight outside on leash again. This is not a punishment; simply a way of assuring that he won't let loose in the house and will start to utilize his "hold it" muscles. Repeat as necessary until he eliminates outside, then praise, treat, play & walk him as instructed above.

Bring him outside just before your bedtime. Do the same routine once or twice during the night. Yes, this will rob you of sleep, but you are allowed to skip the "prize" walk and off-leash indoors time, and believe me: Doing this will also save you many more hours of sleep in coming months, and entire days of aggravation in the coming years.

Why do you have to keep him on leash and not walk him until **after** he eliminates? Because this will teach him that the fun starts **after** he goes, and that eliminating quickly is the way to start the fun. If you walk and play with your pup outside and then go back in as soon as he eliminates, he'll actually learn to postpone elimination as long as possible in order to play/walk longer!

Step 2: For the next 7-10 days, take him outside on leash every 90 minutes during the day and "as needed" in the middle of the night (he'll let you know). Whenever he piddles outside during his daytime breaks, he "wins" the praise, the treat, the walk, the outdoor playtime AND the indoor supervised off-leash play/train time for 30 minutes. If he doesn't piddle outside during his daytime break, he goes back into the crate for 20-30 minutes until you bring him back outside on leash again for another try.

After 7-10 days, if he's had absolutely no accidents for 1 entire week, you may start to add 15 minutes to each segment each day for another 2 weeks. In other words, he gradually gets more time in the crate and out of the crate. Accidents are common, however, especially if you're not watching him like a hawk during those off-leash indoor times. Just backtrack for a day by subtracting 15-30 minutes from each segment until he (and you!) have mastered that length of time. Your mission at this stage of the game is to never give him an opportunity to fail, so ALWAYS supervise indoor off leash activities. **If you can't watch him like a hawk during his indoor off leash time, tie his leash to your belt loop so that you'll be sure to catch him in the act, or better yet so that he learns to let you know he's got to go. This is not a joke – it works!** If you can't tie him to you because you have to take a shower, you may crate him as long as you're certain he's been recently emptied out.

Remember, every time your pup leaves his crate, immediately take him outside on leash before he has time to eliminate inside. Don't give him the opportunity to fail, and he won't. You're almost there!

Step 3: Your puppy now probably understands the routine. Continue to gradually add time to his supervised off leash indoor and crate time until he is successfully holding it for 3 hours indoors and 4 daytime hours in the crate. If you catch him sniffing around suspiciously and squatting "in the act", shout "OUTSIDE OUTSIDE OUTSIDE!" and take him outside on leash immediately, wait for him to calm down and finish eliminating outside, and then praise and treat him, walk & play as usual.

This is when many people start to slack off on the indoor supervision -- and see a lot more accidents too. During Step 3 it is still imperative that you continue to watch him like a hawk during his indoor time so that you can catch him "in the act" if he has a bit more to eliminate. If you can't watch him like a hawk, tie him to you as described in Step 2. This way you can either catch him "in the act", or he'll hold it better, or he'll start to let you know he's got to go!

The crate controversy.

Dog crates have earned a bad reputation because they are sometimes over-used or misused. However, when used properly and gradually, crate training can be a very quick and humane

way to teach a puppy to “hold it” because it utilizes his instinct never to soil his sleeping area or “den”.

After he’s properly housetrained and mouth trained (see our Puppy 101 article or website resources below for Mouth Training), you can sell the crate at your next garage sale, or keep it for transporting him in your car.

The crate you buy needs to be only big enough for him to stand, turn around and lie down for the next 2 months of his life. Since today he’s smaller than he’ll be next week, block off the space he doesn’t need right now with boxes covered by a blanket. It is against his instinct to soil this small area, but if he has any more room, he may soil his crate. Be sure to remove boxes as needed as he grows.

Your puppy’s crate should be kept in your bedroom at night (where he can “tell” you he’s got to go), and in a well-trafficked area like the kitchen during the day. To avoid lugging the crate around every day, some people opt for two crates. Either way, remember that you’ll only need this setup for a few weeks.

Do not leave a puppy under 12 weeks of age in a crate for over 4 hours and expect him to come out “housetrained”. You have to start at 1 hour and work up to 4 hours maximum with a young pup; otherwise you are setting everyone up for failure. **I wouldn’t expect any pup less than 3 months to hold it for longer than 2 hours, and I wouldn’t expect any pup less than 6 months to hold it for longer than 4 hours.**

If you cannot use a crate, follow along with the instructions herein, except keep your pup in a well puppy proofed kitchen where his accidents won’t be as upsetting to you and your family.

Commonly Asked Questions

Q. I work all day. How can I let my puppy out every 2 hours for a week?

A. Start on a weekend. That’ll give you 2 good days to get a head start. Then, seriously consider taking off a personal day or two for housetraining. Out of the question? Try to get home at least twice during the day, and/or have a friend or petsitter drop by a few times. One to two weeks of serious housetraining now will save you a lot of time and money later. Soon you’ll have a fully housetrained puppy, and you won’t have to worry about him while you’re away. (Remember, do not crate your pup if someone can’t let him out frequently during the first 7-10 days; use the puppy-proofed kitchen instead, described below, but keep the crate training going when you are home at night.)

Q. I’m away from home 9 hours a day, I can’t take time off or afford a petsitter, and none of my friends or family can help me out. Now what?

A. Very frankly, you are asking for trouble in the form of an unhappy puppy with serious behavioral problems. You should seriously consider whether a puppy can really fit into your lifestyle and financial means. If however this is a very short-term and temporary situation, and you can vigorously exercise and socialize your pup DAILY during your off-hours, here is your answer: Although difficult on you and your puppy, your mission is not impossible. Bear in mind that housetraining in this way will take longer, and your puppy will probably have more accidents. NEVER LEAVE A PUPPY IN A CRATE FOR THE ENTIRE DAY - he will soil it.

Instead, give him a puppy-proofed area like the linoleum-floor kitchen. Make sure there's nothing he can reach or get into. Line the floor with newspaper for easy cleanup, leave the crate door open and line the crate with a blanket that smells like you, leave the radio on with calm music or a talk show, and give him plenty of durable chew-toys to occupy his time. During your off-hours and weekends, do crate train him as directed here. It will take longer, but he still needs to learn how to hold his bladder and bowel.

Q. Why is it important to housetrain my puppy so quickly?

A. Every time your puppy soils inside your house, he learns "this floor is just as good a place to go as any," and the chances of him going there again will increase. The fewer accidents he has now, the quicker you'll have him housetrained - which means he won't need to spend any more time in the crate!

Q. What should I do if my puppy has an "accident"?

A. Close supervision is key during his free run time, so watch for his "signs" that he has to go (sniffing, panting, circling, staring at you or the door, whining). If you don't catch him "in the act", just clean it up with a non-ammonia cleanser and chalk it up to not being there in time. Your pup won't know what he did wrong, so punishing him is not only a waste of time but confusing to him and completely ineffective (See Step 3 above.) Punishing a pup for an accident also teaches him to sneak off from you when he has to go - he might even become too afraid of you to eliminate in front of you, even when you take him outside! If you do happen to catch him "in the act", shout "OUTSIDE OUTSIDE OUTSIDE!" and take him outside immediately, and praise and treat him outside as he finishes up. Remember: Punishing him is much less effective than simply showing him where you want him to go and properly teaching him how to "hold it".

Q. What if my puppy always soils the crate?

A. Are you sure he wasn't in there for more than an hour or two? If not, he may have been raised by a breeder who kept him in a crate all the time. If this is the case, the crate is useless. Do everything as instructed above, but instead of putting him in the crate, keep him on his leash which is tied to your belt loop(as in Step 3 above). When you have to leave the house, put him in your puppy-proofed kitchen, expect a puddle or a pile when you return home, and DON'T punish him for it!

Crate Do's and Don'ts

DO purchase a crate which is only large enough for your pup to stand up, turn around and lie down in. He'll be housetrained soon, so you won't need an "adult dog" size crate.

DO introduce your puppy to his crate gradually, with praise, toys and treats galore.

DON'T slam the crate door and leave the room when first introducing him to his crate.

DO feed your pup at set intervals during the day (rather than "free-feeding") and take away the food bowl after 5 minutes if he doesn't finish it all. He'll need to go out about 20 minutes after eating.

DO remove the water bowl at about 7pm each evening. This will help him “get through the night.”

DO put in a blanket or other bedding.

DO feed your puppy in his kitchen crate.

DON'T put your puppy into his crate in anger, or as a punishment.

DO give him a good chew-toy or two when he's in his crate.

DO keep in mind: .A new puppy needs to relieve himself several times during the day. In spite of his instinct not to soil his cozy crate, he will be forced by nature to do so if you leave him in it for too long, until he gradually learns how to “hold it”.

DO leave the crate door open when he's out; he may just go in there!

DO praise your puppy when he enters his crate.

DO “ignore” your puppy when he leaves his crate.

DO bring him outside immediately when he leaves his crate.

DON'T leave him in his crate for longer than he can “hold it” (1 hour max. for very young pups, 3 hours for 3-4 months old, 4-5 hours for older pups and dogs)

DON'T give him attention for crying when he goes into his crate. Rather, give him a chew toy before he starts crying, and never open the crate door until he has been quiet for a few seconds. (Click here for tips on Barking problems.)

DON'T leave housetraining or crate training duties to children. Rather, involve them in the process by letting them help you.

DON'T leave your puppy (or adult dog) in a crate all day - if he can hold it in the crate, he can hold it in the rest of the house!

DO praise/treat your pup every time he urinates or defecates outside.

DO give your crate to a new puppy owner when you are done with it!

DON'T use ammonia or any cleanser with ammonia in its ingredients to clean up a pet accident (ammonia smells like urine to your pup and he'll be likely to go there again soon!)