

Housebreaking



Every day, dog owners call us with questions about housebreaking. Too often we hear that a dog was acquired to be an indoor animal, but because he soils the house, he has been relegated to a life in the yard. Our goal at the Dog Trainers Workshop is to help train dogs to be welcome and enjoyable members of the family. In order to do this, one of our first jobs is to help you get your dog housebroken.

Housebreaking a dog can be quite simple, if you understand some basic principles and follow some simple rules.

Dogs are naturally den animals, so a dog does not want to go to the bathroom where he lives. Unfortunately, most of us live in homes that are so big, that the dog does not equate our entire house with his den. Therefore, it is important to keep a dog that is not housebroken in the room you are in. If you let him leave the room, he will equate this with leaving the den, and think it is acceptable to go to the bathroom. If you are in the bedroom, shut him in the bedroom with you. If you go to the kitchen, take him with you. If it is not possible to shut a door, put up a gate, or tie him in the room with you.

Don't watch the clock to determine when your dog needs to go outside, it is his activity that causes him to need to go to the bathroom, not the time that has elapsed. Every time your dog changes activities, he should be taken outside. If he wakes up, take him out, stops playing, out he goes, stops eating, out again. Take him out before the accident occurs.

Do not think it is the dog's responsibility to let you know when he needs to go out, try to watch for his signals to you that he needs to go outside. The signals may be subtle like walking toward the door or sniffing and walking in circles.

If your dog goes to the bathroom in front of you, make an exclamation of disgust and take him outside. ("No" or "Bad Dog" is sufficient.) It is not necessary to drag him to the mess or to rub his nose in it.

If your dog does go to the bathroom in the house while you are not watching, there is absolutely nothing that you can do to correct the dog. Why? Dogs do not remember and feel responsible for actions in the past. If you drag a dog to an old mess and make a fuss, he does not say to himself, "I went to the bathroom there 20 minutes ago, that is why my owner is upset." Instead, he records the situation in his mind, and makes sure the situation does not occur again. In this case, the dog records, "If my owner is present, and I am present, and a mess is present, I will get scolded." The next time there is a mess on the floor and he hears you coming, he will run. Our tendency is to give the dog human reasoning and emotions. Owners call me and say, "But I know my dog knew he was bad, he ran from me and he looked guilty." He is not running from you because he understands that he is responsible for the mess, but because he realizes that if he stays in the situation that includes himself, you, and the mess, that he will be scolded.

If you question whether this is true, pour a glass of water on the floor and talk to the dog in the same tone of voice you use when you find a mess on the floor. He will undoubtedly slink away from you just as he does when the mess is his. This should prove to you that it is not his guilt that makes him leave, but your reaction to the situation.

Since a dog does not want to go to the bathroom where he lives, when you cannot be with him, he needs to be confined to an area that is small enough that he chooses not to go to the bathroom. You might try a laundry room or small bathroom, but we recommend a dog crate. A crate provides your dog with a small den of his own that he will be motivated to keep clean. Furthermore, if you leave him in a crate when you are away from him, you can be sure that nothing you care about will be chewed or destroyed while you are gone.

You may be thinking that if you keep your dog in a crate while you are at work, and again while you are sleeping, he will spend two-thirds of his life in a crate. That may be the case with a new dog who is not housebroken, but this situation won't last long. Soon you will trust him and be able to allow him more freedom when you are not around. Once he is able to keep his crate clean in your absence, try leaving him in a slightly larger space like a laundry room, porch, or kitchen. If he keeps that clean, again enlarge his space. Eventually, he will understand that your entire house is his den, and will work to keep your home clean. Being confined for a few months of training is a small price to pay for a lifetime of enjoying a trained dog!

A few final thoughts . . .

If your dog is going to the bathroom in one location in your home, this is a sign that he is attempting to keep your home clean, however he has established an indoor bathroom. Try feeding him in that location for a few days. This will cause him to reconsider his established bathroom. Most dogs will not go to the bathroom where they eat.

When you let your dog out of his crate, or confined space, immediately take him outside. If he does not go to the bathroom, bring him back inside and confine him again. Wait 20-30 minutes and take him out again. Do not bring a dog inside and allow him to be loose in your house unless he has just gone to the bathroom outside.

We often hear the complaint that an owner has put his dog out in the yard for 20-30 minutes, and as soon as they let the dog in, he goes to the bathroom. Odds are that the dog went to the bathroom as soon as you put him out, then sat outside the door waiting for you. Thirty minutes later, when you let him in, he also needed to go to the bathroom again. Do not let a dog loose in your house unless he has just gone to the bathroom outside.

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