

About House Training

By Jeanne Thomas, CPDT

Can trainers talk too much about house training? If the questions I get from dog owners are any indication, we can't! New dog owners can face a frustrating pattern of messy, stinky behaviors that makes it hard to bond with a canine companion. So, what makes house training go right? Scheduling, control and rewards.

Scheduling

Scheduling is about planning and tracking your dog's daily activities and working with their schedules: sleep times, play times, feeding times and potty times. Planning and record keeping lets you work with the dog's body clock, helps you predict when your dog needs to go, and keeps accidents at a minimum.

There are urinary tract problems and gastrointestinal infections that can effect your dog's ability to "hold it," so be sure to start your house training with a vet visit and check up for your pet. A young puppy is only capable of short periods of bladder and bowel control, so they should be taken out hourly during the day. As puppies grow, you can gradually stretch that one hour to two, three and more. An older dog is fed less frequently and should also have more physical control, but scheduling their meals, playtimes and outings still helps them learn faster.

If you bring a new dog home and can't be home all day to take them out often, look for help in covering the long hours for the first few weeks. Friends, family and professional pet sitters can help your training plan stay on schedule.

Control

Control is finding ways to humanely restrict your dog's freedom to keep bad habits from developing. Freedom to roam the house only comes after a dog knows where to go! A simple technique is to keep the pup on leash with you as you move about your home. This is a great choice when you know your dog's bladder and bowels are empty.

I also use wire or plastic dog crates and exercise pens to confine dogs in training: the crate (just big enough for the pup to sleep comfortably in) is for short periods of confinement, when I am home and able to take my dog out frequently. I might start a puppy at less than an hour of crate time, but if I'm training an older dog who is comfortable in a crate, I will stretch that hour to two or more once I know they can keep the crate clean. When I have to leave a dog in training unsupervised for longer periods, I will leave them in the indoor exercise pen (a puppy play pen), with the floor covered with a plastic sheet and a layer of newspaper, just in case I don't get home in time.

When do you start loosening the control? My rule of thumb is that for every week that goes by without an error, my dog gets a little more free time and a little more chance to explore another room - while supervised - in the house. If my dog has an accident, I back track and restrict their freedom a little more.

Rewards

The flip side of indoor control is giving your dog frequent supervised access to the area you want them to use as a potty zone. (For dogs that have not completed their inoculations, be sure an outdoor potty zone is not accessible to neighborhood dogs who may spread germs to your companion.) When you think your dog is likely to need to go, take it on leash directly from their crate or pen to their potty zone. Stand still, stay quiet and be boring; just hold the leash until the dog finds a spot and does its business. Hurrah!

THAT perfect moment is where the third tool, rewards, comes into play. Immediately after the dog eliminates in a proper place, I tell my dog "Yes!" (my "you just earned a reward" signal), and give it a yummy food treat. Then I either play with the dog outdoors, or take it indoors to run and play with me until it's time to go back on leash or into the crate again. That double reward of food and play lets the dog know that they picked the right place to go!

You can certainly make house training fancier: you can teach your dog to eliminate on cue and to signal you when it needs to go out. But simple scheduling, control and rewards are basics that work together to give your dog the structure to learn good habits and earn the freedom to move about your home. Using these tools, you can be sure that any accidents that occur are just more information to help you make your schedule-control-reward plan even better. Good training!

Jeanne Thomas is a Certified Pet Dog Trainer based in Grand Rapids, MI. Jeanne offers private lessons and in-home problem solving assistance for family pets as well as group puppy, basic, intermediate and Rally lessons. For more information about Jeanne, visit her website at www.teachyourpet.net.