TOILET TRAINING 101



Going back to basics is the best way to master toilet training with your pup.

WORDS JESSICA GOULBURN

Bringing your puppy home is a special time, however, it isn't all fun and games. As soon as your puppy is in its new environment, it's time to start housetraining, a major component of which is toilet training.

Andrew Peterson, a Delta Accredited Professional Trainer from Better Dog Schools, says it's never too early to start. "It's important to set reasonable expectations," he says. "For the first few months of life, puppies may have very little control over their bladder and bowels, and this skill takes time to develop. Puppies may also not even realise that they need to go, so don't expect them to know how to hold it in."

Toilet training a puppy takes time and patience, for you and your dog. There is no magic number for when your dog will learn to go on its own. Every pup will learn at its own pace and it needs time to develop its own routine.

It's imperative that you start toilet training from a very young age. Habits are hard to break, and if you create good and positive behaviours from when your puppy is born, these will last a lifetime.

Tips and tricks

The first step is taking your puppy for a routine vet visit to eliminate any possibility of health problems such as congenital, hormonal or neurological factors, which may contribute to toilet training problems. If you get the all clear from the vet, toilet training is as simple as following the steps. "Focus on teaching your pup when and where to go," Andrew says, "rather than just expecting it to somehow know the rules or trying to punish it for going in the 'wrong place' and expecting that to work."

Take your dog out frequently, and reward it every time it successfully goes to the toilet where it's supposed to. Animal behaviourist, Dr Joanne Righetti, says: "Take your puppy out after every meal, every snack, every treat, every play session, every rest, every sleep, or every thirty minutes." This gives the pup the opportunity to go if it needs to and avoids accidents in places you don't want your dog to toilet. If your puppy successfully toilets, you can probably leave a bit of a longer gap between taking it out. If it doesn't go, it's best to take it out 30 minutes after the original try."

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Take your pup outside regularly and reward it every time it successfully goes to the toilet where it's supposed to.

Andrew advises leading your pup outside, rather than carrying it, "Your pup will learn the habit more quickly if you lead it where you want it to go, rather than chauffeuring it to the spot." He also says the walk will help to stimulate the bladder helping your puppy to be more aware that it needs to go when you get outside.

Always remember to praise your puppy when it goes. Nothing works better than an encouraging word and a delicious treat for the dog to associate doing its business outdoors with the correct behaviour.

Dr Righetti also encourages getting to know your dog's habits. "Watch the dog's behaviour," she says. "Naturally, they start to circle and sniff. Yes, that may be because they're about to lie down to sleep but if it has just got up and it starts circling and sniffing, chances are it's about to go to the toilet so take it outdoors."

Another tip to reinforce toileting outside is to take your pup to the same place every time. This will create a sense of familiarity. Dr Righetti recommends leaving a bit of faeces in that area to stimulate your puppy to go back there. Dogs rely on scent and if you take it to the same spot each time, its own scent will be there to remind it to go. Andrew recommends making this area as close to the dog's living area as possible. "Try not to make the trip from living room to toilet area a marathon, otherwise you'll find your pup may not be able to hold it in all the way."

However, while you can definitely encourage your dog to go in a specific spot, Dr Righetti says to be happy that your dog has gone outside rather than having an accident. "I say to so many people, be thankful that your dog is going outdoors. Never mind that it's going on the patio or right outside your deck, it's going outdoors, it's great."

Always remember to praise your puppy when it goes. Nothing works better than an encouraging word and a delicious treat for the dog to associate doing its business outdoors with the correct behaviour. "If it starts to go, you can begin praising it," Andrew says. "Once it's finished make sure it feels like the most special pup on the planet, and offer a treat or two and perhaps a short play session."

Crate training

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that a dog will very rarely go to the toilet where it lives. It's therefore imperative to create clear boundaries for your puppy to understand. Crate training can be a fantastic way to speed up the process because it teaches your pup the lesson of patience. →

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All dogs have accidents, no matter how young or old. How you deal with these accidents, especially when it's a young pup, will definitely impact on the way the dog reacts and learns from the experience.

However, it's very important to remember that puppies, much like babies, need time to learn bladder control. It won't happen overnight. "People tend to expect their dogs to be trained immediately and sometimes don't realise that they're little, they're just babies, and they have to learn to control," Dr Righetti says. "They have to be taught where the toilet is."

If you're unable to watch your puppy every minute of the day, it's recommended you create a small space for it to call its own. This may mean closing off certain doors in your home and creating a section of the home for the dog to use. It can also mean using a crate. However, you must make sure the crate is the right size for the dog.

It must be big enough for your puppy to turn around comfortably and lie down, but not so big that it can create its own toilet in the corner. This can help to housetrain your puppy as it won't go in its living space, it will rather give you signs that it needs to go, and wait for you to let it out. Signs that your pup needs to go include whining, circling, sniffing or barking.

If you need to leave it for longer, Andrew advises creating a slightly bigger area where you don't mind an accident if it occurs. "Confine them to a different, larger area that's easier to clean up, perhaps with a pee-pad in the corner. This will let it sleep in one area of the space and toilet in the other without feeling stressed that it's soiling its den."

Puppy problems

Your puppy may run into some problems along the way. What's important is the way you deal with them. Andrew says that problems are usually caused by high expectations of owners. "We often forget that toilet training is a skill puppies need to acquire, and like everything it's learned gradually," he says.

A puppy may urinate due to excitement because it is unable to completely control its bladder. This can happen when you walk through the door after you've left it for a little bit or if new people enter its space. Andrew recommends training your puppy to be calm by being calm yourself. "The best thing to do is keep greetings calm rather than revving up the pup. Acknowledge it when you first walk into the room, but don't make a fuss, and instead head straight to the toileting area and wait for it to go – then you can greet it properly and play with it."

Generally problems occur if there's been a gap in applying toilet training 101. Andrew advises to have patience and go back to basics. Alternatively, if your puppy is still having problems and you believe you're doing everything right, you can call in the experts.

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Joanne Righetti

Dealing with accidents

All dogs will have accidents, no matter how young or old. How you deal with these accidents, especially when it's a young pup, will definitely impact on the way the dog reacts and learns from the experience. Do not punish the puppy. Effective toilet training is all about positive reinforcement rather than making the dog feel guilty or naughty because it made a mistake.

Accidents can also be a sign of anxiety. Punishing the dog will only reinforce any anxiety or nervousness the dog may be feeling and this can force education backwards. The first thing to do when you find an accident is to thoroughly

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If you live in a high-rise apartment, you may need to train your pup to go inside. This can be done by laying down paper, creating a litter tray or investing in a pet-loo.

clean the area to remove any smell. Dogs are creatures of habit and they thrive on their sense of smell. If dogs are given the opportunity to go indoors, they will continue to gravitate to that spot and it will become habitual. They will also follow the scent of their previous toilet stops. It's therefore crucial to completely clean up after any indoor accident.

Dr Righetti advises dealing with accidents calmly and efficiently. "What is leading the dogs to go back to the same spot, is habit and comfort," she says. "But there's also a smell attraction. We need to remove the smell and we do that by using an enzymatic cleaner." This can be bought or created at home using an enzymatic washing powder.

Another suggestion from Dr Righetti is playing or laying down treats in the area that the dog keeps going back to. "Dogs don't like to go to the toilet in living areas. So if you start living in that area where they're toileting, that will stop them," she explains.

It's also important to realise that there are other options to taking your dog outside. If you're immobile, in a 20-storey building or on a boat, it may be impossible for your dog to toilet outside. "A lot of countries accept that their dogs will need to go indoors," Dr Righetti says, "you can provide a toilet."

This can be done by laying down paper, creating a litter tray, putting down pee-pads or investing in a pet-loo.

Training in this situation is still as important. Instead of training your puppy to go outside to toilet, you need to train it to go to the specific spot in the house where you've created the toilet. Use all the methods you would if you were taking it outside, but instead of taking it to the garden, take your puppy to its toilet.

Keep up the praise

Remember that just because a dog is trained doesn't mean it won't have the occasional accident. These can be brought on by stress or other emotions and it's up to you to remind your dog that it's okay.

To reinforce your dog's training throughout its life, continually praise it for doing the right thing. "As owners we sometimes take toilet training for granted, which means we stop rewarding our dogs for toileting success once they've grown up, and assume that the habit will just stay with them for life," Andrew says. "Toilet training can lapse because it didn't get reinforced enough. So it's a good idea to still reward toileting success occasionally, for the whole of your dog's life – even if it's just with praise or play – to help maintain the habit." •••



How to teach an old dog new tricks

The first thing to do when training an older dog is take it to visit the vet. "Make sure there's nothing physiological. Check for a urinary tract infection and bladder control," Dr Righetti says.

Andrew warns that your training methods may have to change if there is a problem. "If an older dog is genuinely incontinent then management strategies will need to be introduced, for example, changing sleeping arrangements so that bedding can be easily washed."

The good news is that you can teach an old dog new tricks, all you have to do is go back to basics. Do everything you would do to train a puppy, and take it out after every meal and every sleep.

What may be different when it comes to an older dog is the time it takes for the training to kick in, as it is likely to have established habits.

Dr Righetti suggests a unique training method – attaching your dog to you. "You can follow it and it can follow you. If your dog is attached to you for a week, it's not going to have an accident," she says, "because you're going to see what it's doing." While this is an unconventional method and can be inconvenient at times, it does work and it works quickly to re-train your older dog to go in the designated area, whether this is outside or a specific spot in the house.

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