



HOUSETRAINING

Overview

Housetraining is one of the most important tasks for the new puppy owner. Most dogs spend a considerable amount of their lives inside the home, so this makes successful housetraining essential. Successful completion of housetraining is so important, that a dog is at risk of being given away or taken to the shelter if it is not trained in an expedient manner to be dependable in its elimination habits. For the most part, housetraining involves reinforcing elimination behaviour in a desirable location while preventing the behaviour in undesirable locations for a long enough period that the appropriate behaviour becomes well entrenched. The whole process may take anywhere from several weeks to many months depending on the consistency of the family and the pet's capacity for learning. A consistent, patient owner should be able to complete housetraining within a relatively short period of time, usually within three months. The overall goal of housetraining is to teach the puppy when to eliminate, where to eliminate and on what material to eliminate.

General principles for housetraining

Reinforce elimination in a desirable area: The first step is to teach the pet where it is acceptable to eliminate. To do this, the owner must guide the pet to the chosen elimination area, mildly praise any sniffing or other pre-elimination behaviours, and heartily praise it immediately after it eliminates. The owner can also provide a small food reward immediately following elimination to more strongly reinforce the behaviour in the desired location. The opportunity to eliminate outdoors should frequently be given to the pet, especially after eating, drinking, napping, playing and before confinement periods. In order to be consistent, the owner must go outside with the pet every time in order to supervise and reward appropriate elimination. Because the act of emptying the bladder and/or bowel is rewarding in and of itself, owners should be counselled that what they want to reward is the act of eliminating in the proper location. It is often desirable to use a phrase (go potty, be quick, hurry, take care of business) as the puppy begins to eliminate. This can often place the elimination behaviour under verbal control, which is useful when the puppy is not on its home territory.

Provide a consistent feeding schedule: The owner needs to set up a relatively fixed feeding schedule. Food should be offered for about 30 minutes, two to three times daily, at the same time every day. By controlling the time at which the pet eats, the owner will have some control over when it eliminates, which hopefully will be a time when the owner will be available to take it outdoors. The last meal should be finished about four hours prior to bedtime. Water should be available all day and taken up just

prior to bedtime unless the pet requires access to water throughout the night due to a medical problem.

Prevent elimination in undesirable areas: One of the most important facets of housetraining involves preventing the habit of eliminating in the home from forming. The pet must be very closely supervised for an adequate number of weeks until elimination in an appropriate area has been satisfactorily reinforced. To accomplish this, the pet must be kept within eyesight of a family member 100% of the time when it is roaming about in the home. The owner should confine the pet to a small area, such as an exercise pen, or place it outdoors when it can't be supervised. Baby gates or a leash can be used to prevent the pet from wandering away when the owner is busy. Confining a puppy to a kennel when it cannot be watched is a common way to prevent the pet from house soiling during training. The owner should be counselled not to over use it. The pet should not be confined to a small sleeping area for longer than it can physically control elimination or for more than four to five hours during the day on a constant schedule. Until the pup has not eliminated in the home for at least four to eight consecutive weeks, it should not be considered housetrained or allowed to wander off unattended. Once that time has passed and the pup is exhibiting control, it can gradually be given more freedom in the home unsupervised.

Deal with mistakes: No matter how closely the pet is watched, mistakes are bound to happen. If the house soiling repeatedly occurs in one area, an objectionable habit may readily become established. To help prevent this, urine and fecal odour should be removed from soiled areas with an effective commercial deodorizing product. Fabric and carpets should be soaked with the product, since merely spraying the surface is not likely to be as effective. Closing doors or moving furniture over frequently soiled areas will prevent access to those areas. The pet can be taught to avoid some areas by making them unpleasant. Upside-down mousetraps, balloons set to pop when disturbed and motion-activated alarms can be successful in teaching a pet to avoid an area. However, these items should only be used when the positive approach alone has failed since any aversive stimulus runs some risk of inducing fear in a sensitive young puppy. Another way to prevent re-soiling is to change the behavioural function of the areas. Since a dog usually won't eliminate in an area where it eats, sleeps or plays, the owner can place food bowls, water bowls, the pet's bed or toys in areas where the pet has soiled to stop elimination in those places.

Punishment: Punishment is overused, relatively ineffective and not required for successful housetraining. It must be discussed with all pet owners because it is usually used in an inappropriate manner. All owners should understand that physical punishment, harsh reproach and rubbing the pet's nose in urine or feces are unacceptable, ineffective and may break the bond between the owner and the pet. A sharp noise such as a quick stomp of the foot, a loud handclap, or a sharp thump on a table top can be used to interrupt the pet when it is caught in the act of eliminating in an inappropriate area. The sound should be just loud enough to stop the behaviour without frightening the pet and it should not be associated with the owner. The interruption should only be given during the unwanted behaviour. The pet should then be taken to

the area the owner has chosen as an appropriate elimination area and praised for completing its eliminations there.