



## Housebreaking Puppies

Written by: Sam Kabbel, CPDT-KSA  
[www.petbehaviorsolutions.com](http://www.petbehaviorsolutions.com)

Housebreaking a puppy can seem like a daunting task! Puppies need to learn when and where they *should* and should not eliminate. When approached properly, however, this task is not as daunting as people think. A successful housebreaking program involves four major concepts: *Association*, *Supervision*, *Confinement*, and *Sequencing*.

**Association** – Housebreaking is less ‘training’ than it is helping your puppy form an association. The reinforcement is built into the act of eliminating. Basically, puppies feel better when they eliminate -- (the commonly used word *is* “relieving” oneself after all). The primary goal in housebreaking is to help your puppy associate this feeling of relief with an acceptable location, such as the outdoors.

You should go outside with your puppy when he needs to eliminate. Be sure to praise your puppy the moment he begins to eliminate! This will help him find the location reinforcing. Once this association becomes strong, he will seek to eliminate in the location in which he feels better, much like we look for the doors with the little plastic people on them.

**Supervision** – Associations can also be formed between relief and an unacceptable location (e.g., the living room carpet). Problems can arise when a puppy has frequent accidents indoors. He feels just as relieved when he goes on carpet as when he goes outside! To avoid this, it is important to make sure your puppy has as few accidents indoors as possible. Your puppy must be supervised or confined when supervision is not possible. You will need to identify the times when your puppy will most likely need to relieve himself. These situations include:

- After chewing on bones, playing with toys, or any form of playing.
- After waking up from a nap.
- After a big refreshing drink.
- When wandering around, sniffing the floor or furniture.
- Within an hour after eating. (The puppy’s intestines are stimulated after eating. If you are not home during the day, you should not leave your puppy’s food down.)
- When transitioning from one activity to another.

It is best not to scold or otherwise punish the puppy when he is caught in the act. Unfortunately, what the puppy may learn is that it is unsafe to eliminate in front of you. This is not an ideal situation! Eliminating indoors should be annoying or startling to the puppy, but he should not associate that annoyance with your presence.

One strategy to use if your puppy begins to eliminate indoors is called the “haunted” house. If he begins to eliminate indoors, make a loud, scary noise! Try dropping a book, closing a cabinet or drawer loudly, or banging on a countertop. If the puppy startles, and stops eliminating, immediately begin the sequence to the outdoors and praise the puppy when he finishes relieving himself outside. Puppies should not be grabbed and put outdoors for punishment, or they may come to view outside in a negative way.

If you find that your puppy has had an accident, punishment after the fact will not be effective. The puppy will not understand what he is being punished for. (Puppies may come to associate the *presence* of their own excrement with your displeasure, but they won’t be able to tie that in with their behavior of eliminating.) Supervision is critical at this stage in housebreaking. Only vigilant supervision will ensure that the puppy is taken out at the appropriate times thus avoiding accidents.

Sometimes supervision is not as easy as it seems! Consider attaching your puppy to you with an indoor leash that is approximately 6-feet in length. Your puppy will not have an opportunity to slip out of your sight because he is attached to you! While this may be quite inconvenient, it is the most effective way to become vigilant!

Another useful tool is a bell attached to your puppy's collar. You should become aware of what your puppy is doing based on the sound of the bell. When the bell is jingling, your puppy is in motion and you need to know what he is up to. When it stops jingling, check to see what activity your puppy has settled into. Once it starts jingling again, your puppy has changed activities and you might consider taking him outside.

**Confinement** – When unable to supervise the puppy, confinement is a valuable training tool. Confinement (e.g., a crate or small, 'puppy-proofed' pen or room) will have the added benefit of helping your puppy learn to "hold it". (Request the PBS crate-training article for information on acclimating your puppy to a crate.)

A properly crate-trained dog should sleep or rest calmly when in the crate. During sleep, the body produces a hormone (vasopressin) that curtails the production of urine. This means the puppy will not have to eliminate as often. The crate should be just big enough for a puppy to stand, turn around, and rest comfortably. A crate that is too large can teach a puppy to create a resting area and a "bathroom" area. (This same issue could arise if puppies are confined in a small room.)

**Sequencing** – This is the final component in the process of housebreaking. Your puppy needs to know what to do when he needs to relieve himself. When you notice signs that your puppy may have to eliminate (remember, we identified the signs while closely supervising the puppy), help him find the right sequence outside. This step requires guidance for your puppy.

Do not carry your puppy outdoors; he needs to walk outside in order to learn the sequence. Encourage your puppy to approach you and 'lead' you back to the door to open it for him. This will help him to find you when he needs to go instead of simply waiting by the door for someone to come open it! You may also wish to teach your puppy to bark at the back door or ring a bell to get you to open the door.

Do not use an unsupervised dog door until the puppy visibly seeks the outdoors for elimination. Just because he has access to the outdoors doesn't mean he knows to seek it for elimination. If you wish to then use a dog door as part of your puppy's sequence, do not allow the puppy outdoors through any other door. The puppy needs to understand the necessary steps toward attaining the desired relief.

Never treat or reward the puppy for coming inside after eliminating. A puppy can learn to go out and come right back in to get the treat. If you use treats to reward him, the treat must be given right as he finishes while he is still outside. Otherwise, some clever puppies will learn to urinate in small quantities just to earn the treat. You should go outside with your puppy when he needs to eliminate. Dogs are social animals and want to be with their families. If you put your puppy outside for a period of time without you and then let him in, he may learn to hold it until you allow him back inside with his family. Then he will really have to go and will probably have an accident! Stay out for at least 15 minutes with him. Young puppies frequently eliminate, then sniff around, play a little, then eliminate again. If you bring your puppy inside the moment he finishes eliminating, he may not be finished! Remember to praise your puppy *while* he is eliminating in the right location!

Patience and consistency will enable you to guide your puppy to making the right choice about where to "go!" If you continue to have a problem with housebreaking, there may be other issues involved (e.g. anxiety, submissive urination, urinary tract infection, etc.). Please first contact your veterinarian for a medical check up, then contact Pet Behavior Solutions to assist you further.