

HOUSETRAINING YOUR ADULT DOG

Housetraining an adult dog should follow the same program as outlined in my HOUSETRAINING article. Housetraining is a human concept and is contradictory to the basic nature of being a dog. Think about it. When the dogs live as dogs in the dog/dog world they do not need bladder control because when they have to go they just go. The only instinctual dog behaviors regarding their potty habits are the dogs do not like to potty where they eat or where they sleep. This does not mean they need a large space differentiation from these areas. They may only take a couple of steps away from their sleeping place or their eating place. This also seems to hold true in many cases for where the dog is playing at a given time. Even when a pup is playing with you, a regular toy, or chew toy, they will get up and take two steps and squat. Then, they return to where they were. The adult dogs seem to display this same behavior. For example, in the yard, when you are playing fetch with your dog or if two dogs are playing together and they need to potty, they will often stop, step to the side and potty and then return to the play session. My dogs love to retrieve balls in the yard. When I throw the ball, they will run out, get the ball, and sometimes on the way back to me they will stop, step to the side and potty and return to their original path to bring the ball back to me.

I have discussed these behaviors to explain the only truly “instinctual” dog potty behaviors. These are the extent of the dogs’ innate comprehension of one place being acceptable and another place being unacceptable and these are governed by their instincts. However, we choose to bring the dogs into our human/dog world. We require them to learn acceptable potty behaviors as dictated by human perceptions, desires, and demands. This means they have to somehow learn that one place is acceptable and another place is unacceptable and these “places” and their acceptability or unacceptability are determined by us. These concepts have no correlation to the basic nature of being a dog. Additionally, for the dogs to gain any understanding of these concepts is asking them to reason through a very complex thought process. For them, these concepts just do not compute in dog language or by their instinctual nature. To their credit, IF we do our part properly the dogs can become “pattern trained” to potty behaviors that are ostensibly beyond their ability to truly comprehend. They do not actually understand WHAT is being asked of them or WHY. But, they can become “pattern trained” to the behavior being demanded of them.

To teach or train any behavior requires us to be patient, understanding, and consistent. While this is true of any behavior we are training/teaching, it is absolutely essential when trying to “pattern” a behavior which is contradictory to their basic nature. You have to realize that “patterning” any behavior takes time. This is true with humans and more so with another species such as a dog. The key to patterning a behavior means you have to be consistent in the presentation of the desired behavior and prevention of the undesired behavior. Consequently, you must provide plenty of access to the “acceptable” potty area as determined by you which is usually outside. The dog will not just suddenly decide to take themselves out the doggie door. They certainly cannot open the door to the yard and they cannot take themselves for a potty walk. Every element of the dogs pottying WHERE you want them to is 100% dependent on YOU. *Note: This is true even when*

your dog is fully housetrained. If the doggie door is blocked, they cannot accommodate the patterned behavior. If you do not have a doggie door and you are gone longer than their bladder capacity can accommodate, they will be pushed beyond their ability to hold their potty and they will have no option but to go in the house or their crate. For a fully housetrained dog, this is exceedingly stressful and not good for them physically. If the dogs are trying to keep with their “pattern trained” behavior and your actions do not provide them the potty access they need, they will hold beyond what is physically good for them. If this occurs repeatedly, the dogs will often develop bladder or urinary tract infections.

There are multiple scenarios for why you may be faced with housetraining an adult dog. You may have an adult dog you never fully housetrained. I have many people who contact me because their adult dog is basically “housetrained”, but still has the occasional accident in the house. Or, their dog has been fine in the house for a couple of years and is now having a periodic accident. In the first case, the dog has never been fully housetrained. All that occurred was the owner managed to provide appropriate outside potty access say 80% of the time. The accidents occur when the owner misses the schedule, routine, and potty needs of the dog. The reason the owners get a false sense that their dog is housetrained is because as the dogs mature they have larger bladders and do not require the frequency of potty access they did as a pup. Basically, the dog’s bladder is larger so they have to potty less frequent. If the owner happens to provide potty access at the needed times, the dog will appear to be housetrained except for the occasional accidents when the potty access was not provided when the dog’s bladder size dictated. The second situation occurs because the owner’s schedule changed and they are not providing the same level of potty access they were previously. *Note: Even fully housetrained dogs can have potty accidents if their schedule or their life takes a dramatic change OR if the dog has a medical/health issue.*

Another scenario of needing to housetrain an adult dog can occur when you adopt an adult dog from a shelter, rescue group, another person, or take in a stray and the dog has not been previously housetrained. This can happen because the dog was never previously housetrained properly. It can occur because the dog has never lived in a house, rather lived in their yard. It can be because the dog was a stray for an extended period of time and reconnected with the normal potty habits of a dog living on its own. Then, you have the dogs who have spent the majority of their lives in a cage or crate. When this is the case, there is no housetraining in place. Moreover, these dogs have also learned to “adapt” to living, eating, and sleeping IN their own excrement. Even though this is against their basic nature, they can come to accept that this is their life as it is all they have ever known.

Regardless of the situation that precipitated you needing to housetrain an adult dog, the process for accomplishing this is the same. The crucial foundation to this process is patience, understanding, and consistency. Then, I recommend that you train your adult dog using the same method presented in my HOUSETRAINING article. This means taking the dog back to square one and training them as though they know NOTHING! Consider that whatever they do know is incorrect, incomplete, skewed, or they are

completely governed by their most basic nature because they were never exposed to anything else. Additionally, you will want to use crate training in conjunction with your housetraining. My article on CRATE TRAINING will help with this. The two articles go hand in hand.

Let me repeat, for your adult dog, go back to square one and train them as if they are a pup and know nothing! This means providing potty access far more frequent than you may think is necessary. The ONLY difference between housetraining a pup and an adult dog is the adult dog has a larger bladder. But, do not try to make their bladder capacity fit your perception of what it should be. Whatever their body “needs” are, those are what the dog will do. Your part will be to stay AHEAD of the accidents. Take them out more often than you perceive they need. I will also tell you that every dog is different, just like every person is different. Consequently, one adult dog may have different potty needs than another adult dog. When housetraining an adult dog, do not take anything for granted. What I can assure you is when they have potty accidents; these are not THEIR accidents. They are YOUR accidents.

The “yard potty pen” discussed in my HOUSETRAINING article is very helpful with adult dogs. This seems to help both pups and adult dogs make a more concrete connection with the outside potty behavior you are trying to pattern.

Do not expect any dog to give you a consistent SIGNAL they need to go out. It is not common for the dogs to give any indication beyond just going to the door they have been “patterned” to expect WILL open when they need potty access. They expect the door will just open. They may per chance connect that if they scratch on the door, raise up on the door, whine or bark the door magically opens. Unfortunately, these behaviors often end up being extinguished. Why? Any behavior, that is not reinforced positively or negatively, will extinguish itself. This is the crux of “operant conditioning” and is a proven behavioral reaction in many species including the dogs. If your dog sits at the door and you are on the phone, talking to a visitor, or doing something else; you will often not notice the dog doing a “signaling” behavior. This is why many people tell me their pup/dog has been doing really good on their housetraining and is only having accidents right in front of the door. If you are busy, not paying attention, or are in another room you will NOT see them sitting at the door or scratching at the door or raising up on the door. If your dog has “started” to get the idea of housetraining and they TRY to give you an indication and you do not respond, the result is their “signaling” behavior will extinguish itself, cease to occur.

Let’s talk about barking to let you know they need to go outside. If you are in the room with them and they give you one little “woof”, you may look over and see they are at the door and must need to go out. This is pretty good. Now, think about the number of times you “correct” your dog for barking. Believe me, after a time your dog will cease to “bark” to be let outside. This may not mean your dog is good about NOT barking at critters in the yard or people walking down the alley or in front of your house. The difference is barking in these circumstances is motivated by an entirely different

reaction/reflex mode. These situations are driven by their instincts. Housetraining is NOT instinctual in any regard.

If you desire a manner for your dog to “signal” their potty needs, you can teach them to use bells or one of the commercial products they can step on which will make a noise you will hear and be able to respond to. When “pattern training” your dog to use one of these “signaling” methods, you will have to be 100% at responding by providing them with potty access. You can also train your dog to go and bring their leash to you as their signal. The key to any of these options is 100% response from you. Consequently, when you or someone is not available to respond to their signal, you would need to remove the signaling item. If you do not, they will signal, there will be no potty access, and their signaling behavior will eventually extinguish itself.

Additionally, be prepared for the dogs to use these signaling methods for times when they just want to go outside whether they need potty access or not. YOU cannot allow yourself to determine which is which. You cannot say, NO, you were just outside; you do not need to go out again. If you are unresponsive in ANY circumstance, the use of the signaling item will cease to have meaning for your dog in any situation including their potty needs.

When housetraining any pup or dog, if there have been accidents in the house you must clean those areas effectively. Otherwise, the pup/dog will be drawn back to those areas and they can even become “patterned” to using a particular area. For example, it is common for dogs to eventually determine a “specific” potty area in their yard. This does not mean they do not use other areas of the yard, but they will more often than not go to the same areas. This ends up being almost a designated potty area for the dogs. Then, even when someone brings in a new dog, that dog will eventually use that same area. If your dog has had accidents in your house, they will be drawn to the smell just like they are on their walks in the neighborhood. But, also many dogs who take regular walks will develop patterns for precise places they will potty on their walks. They may use other areas, but they will almost always use those “specific” areas. This is the same process that occurs in your home.

What I recommend is to effectively clean a potty accident area in the house and then block access to that area for a time. This is especially necessary if the dog has used the same area several times. There are many products that purport to clean urine, feces, or vomit accidents. Many of these are effective on vomit and on feces. However, few are effective on urine. There is an active enzyme in the dogs’ urine that continues to work with many of these commercial products. This is why people can clean urine areas and then several months later they walk into the house and can smell urine. This is especially true when the humidity is extremely high or when it is raining. There is only one product I have found to be truly effective on urine and then, only when used exactly as directed. The product is Nature’s Miracle. You soak up as much of the urine as possible. Then, saturate the area with the Nature’s Miracle. Let it sit for about five minutes. Get a wet rag or towel that has been rung out as much as possible. Place this wet rag over the area. Then, place a dry rag or towel over the wet one. Leave this for 3-5 days!

Additionally, I recommend blocking off any house potty accident area for an extended period of time. This may mean several weeks or a couple of months. This is especially necessary IF the area has been used repeatedly. The reason for blocking these areas is to BREAK the pattern, the habit of the dog going to a particular area to potty. This may be unsightly or inconvenient for you. But, I assure you this is a small price to pay for breaking an undesirable pattern of behavior.

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