

Housebreaking Your Rescue Puppy or Adult Dog and Eliminating Marking Behavior

Housebreaking is a common issue and concern for rescue dogs and their adoptive parents. Many dogs that come into rescue, even the adults, have never been in a house before so they have no idea that eliminating in a house is unacceptable. While fosters work on housebreaking while the pup is with them, it isn't always achieved, and even if it is, a dog may not know how to ask to go out in a new environment with new people and the stress of moving to a new home with new smells can be enough to confuse a dog and cause it to forget being housebroken. Additionally, fosters expect their pups to have housebreaking issues, so they keep a careful eye on them and make sure to get them outside frequently and regularly. In general, puppies are easier to housebreak than adult dogs that have never been housebroken.

The 4 Phases of Housebreaking

There are 4 phases of learning that happen in housebreaking a dog:

1. Learning that outside is a good place to potty
2. Learning that inside is not a good place to potty and holding it until getting to go outside to potty.
3. Learning to "ask" to go outside to potty (aka an indicator)
4. Learning that ALL houses and indoor areas must follow the same rules as home.

Each dog goes through these phases at different speeds. You have to follow them for your dog. Some may get through them in less than a week (my record is 3 days with my dog when he was a puppy). Some may take a month or longer. Success and speed will strongly depend on how dedicated and vigilant you are to watching your dog. Rushing them through the steps will only lead to failure and accidents and make it take longer for the dog to learn.

Phase 1: Pottying Outside is Good.

Phase 1 is probably the easiest to achieve. It simply involves taking the dog or puppy outside frequently and then rewarding the dog with praise or treats when they go. I recommend taking the dog out every hour or so in addition to other times of high accident frequency. This includes immediately after naps, immediately after eating (eating pushes digestion of previous meals along and the dog wants to eliminate to make room for more food), about 30-45 minutes after drinking heavily, during and right after excited play sessions, right before bed, and right away in the morning. You want to set the dog up to succeed, so getting him outside when his biology says it's time to potty will improve your chances of getting Phase 1 solid. It is important to understand your dog's capabilities when it comes to pottying. Young puppies CANNOT hold it long regardless of denning instinct. They just can't. Usually a good rule is a potty break AT MINIMUM every 30 minutes for every week of age the puppy is. So an 8 week old puppy should go out at LEAST every 4 hours. This means you may need to come home for lunch during your work day and wake up for a midnight potty break. Not working with this age limit may mean accidents in the crate that the puppy is forced to sit in. It may also teach the puppy to break his denning instinct and that it is OK to potty in his crate or that his crate is a bad

place because there is always potty in it. As an adult, generally 8 hours is the longest they should go without a break. Many dogs can and will hold it longer, but it isn't healthy for them to do so and if they do happen to have an accident because they just can't hold it and wait for 9 hours for you to come home from work, it may backtrack housebreaking learning. If you know you will have long days, it is important that you set up an alternative way for your dog to get the chance to go out to potty. Ask a friend, family member, or neighbor to take the dog out for a quick break, or hire a dog walker. Some people install doggie doors to their fenced back yards. This can be a good solution, however, a dog alone all day in a fenced yard may also cause other problems (such as digging/escaping, barking all day, etc). Make sure that this is a viable option for your individual dog or you may come home to angry neighbors, a destroyed yard, or a missing dog.

It also helps to have a specific area for pottying so that your dog will learn where the best place to go is. If it smells like potty the dog is more likely to use that spot in the future. However, it is important to keep this area clean and picked up. Just like us, dogs don't like stepping in their feces and may avoid that area if there is too much waste there and choose to potty on your patio or driveway instead. You can even teach a dog to eliminate on command and that now is the time for a potty break by saying "Lets go potty" or something similar every time you take the dog out for a potty break. **Please note that I ignore door manners (from the "Door Dashing" guide) when housebreaking a dog. It is more important to get them out there fast so they can go potty and learn housebreaking at this point. Plenty of time after they have started to learn to hold it to teach door manners for potty breaks**

Phase 2: Pottying Inside is Not Good.

The most common method for achieving Phase 2, and most effective in my experience, is using a crate to assist in housebreaking. Most dogs have what's called a "Denning Instinct". This means that they don't like to eliminate where they sleep. Confining them properly in a crate creates that denning instinct which prevents the dog from having accidents when you can't be watching them. (See "Creating Crate Harmony" guide for information on how to properly condition your dog to see his crate as a den.) Please note that this doesn't work for some dogs that have severe confinement anxiety and will eliminate in their crates. It is very important to crate the dog any time you can't be watching them! This means if you are making dinner, or reading a book, or working on your computer. This will prevent accidents from happening without your knowledge. Every time the dog gets away with having an accident in the house, it only reinforces to him that the house is an ok place to eliminate!

Any time the dog isn't crated, it is important that you are vigilant with watching him. I like to keep new fosters leashed in the house so that I can quickly take them out if they need to go and don't have to fumble with a leash clip. Look for any signs that he is getting ready to eliminate: sniffing intently, circling, pacing, etc. Each dog has different signs that they are about to go. Make a LOUD noise to startle them out of their potty ritual. It is important that even if they start to go you don't punish them. Dogs CAN and HAVE learned that their owners think pottying in general is bad behavior and won't do it around them which can create all sorts of problems. You just want to startle the dog to get them to stop, then take them outside. Shaker cans or water bottles filled with rocks or metal nuts can be thrown in their direction (DO NOT HIT THE DOG WITH THESE), or

you can yell loudly (just make sure you aren't bearing down yelling AT the dog), or an airhorn, etc. Then say "Lets go potty!" or whatever word you are going to use to teach the dog to eliminate on command and take them outside. Praise heavily when they go, even if they had a partial accident inside the house. It is also important to remember that dogs have very short memories. If you miss an accident, you have to just clean it up and let it go. Punishing a dog for an accident that happened even minutes ago will not help a dog become housebroken. They will not make the association that you were mad at them for pottying in the house. Additionally, rubbing their nose in the accident will not achieve anything. They can smell that accident from the other side of the house, but rather than thinking that "mom is mad because I pooped" they will just think "mom is mad and there is poop". If a non-housebroken dog has an accident that you missed, the fault is on you for not watching the dog carefully while it was loose.

It is important that any accident be cleaned up immediately with an **Enzymatic Cleaner** like Nature's Miracle (what I use). A dog's sense of smell is beyond amazing and even if you thoroughly clean up their mess with a regular cleaner, they will still be able to pick up minute traces of that accident, which can trigger their brains into thinking that spot is an acceptable place to potty in the future since it was a potty spot in the past. Enzymatic cleaners break down the chemical compounds of urine into something the dog won't recognize as urine. It is also important to make sure you aren't using an ammonia based cleaner. Most of these are glass cleaners, but even a fine mist overspray when you're cleaning the window can make something smell like urine to a dog.

Once the dog understands that pottying inside is not a good thing, they will start to "hold it" and will wait to go potty until you take them outside. Continued praise for outside pottying should happen throughout the dog's life. At this time, you can start giving them some freedom while you are gone if you wish. Start with very short trips and work your way up to longer trips as the dog remains successful. Remember that dogs

Phase 3: Indicating the Need to Potty

Now that the dog has learned that pottying inside is bad, they should already be well into learning that the door is involved when going out to potty. Many times during Phase 2, people will get frustrated that the dog is having accidents right next to the door. The fact that the dog goes to the door in the first place is a GOOD sign. YOU just weren't paying enough attention to get the dog out when it needed to go. This is the beginning of an "indicator" which is just a fancy way for saying that the dog is learning to tell you that they have to go out to potty. Your dog should be praised for going over by the door (I usually say "Good boy! You have to go potty?") and you should immediately take them out to go and praise them when they do. Different dogs indicate in different ways. One of my dogs will sit 5 feet away from us and give a distinct groan. He won't let us pet him, he just moves away and sits again. My other dog comes up to me and starts nudging me and pacing around. This is a more confusing indicator since she also does that for meal times and when she wants love, but I don't take the chance. Most indicators start with the dog just going over by the door and learning that when they go by the door they get to go out to potty. Gradually, as the dog learns control and to hold it, you can start pushing the indicator by waiting while the dog is at the door to get one that is more notice catching (like whining, groaning, barking, scratching, etc). It is important to balance that wait time with the urgency of the dog needing to go out so that you don't end up with an accident. Always praise the dog when they give a good indicator so you can build that behavior in

them. Once the dog learns an indicator near the door and has very good control to hold it, start pushing the indicator further by making them come to you to ask to go out rather than staying by the door. This way if you are in a different room and busy, you won't miss the indicator because you didn't hear the dog whine at the door.

Once dogs learn that an indicator gets them to go outside, nearly all go through a phase of using the indicator every 5 minutes so that they can be outside because outside is fun. It is important to make sure that when you take a pup out for a potty break, it is JUST a potty break and no play time happens except briefly as a reward for a good potty. If the dog gets to play every time he indicates that he has to potty, he will never get beyond this phase and will become a very annoying housemate.

Bell training for an indicator. This one is becoming more and more common for people. It works very well for dogs that don't vocalize much or that aren't getting past staying by the door to indicate. Bells are loud and can usually be heard across the house. They also work well if the dog's indicator is to start scratching at the door. Teaching them to paw the bells instead of the door will save some damage and make the noise much easier to hear around the house. Just be prepared for the phase of asking to go out every 5 minutes. It gets VERY annoying when you are using bells; your whole house will sound like Santa is ALWAYS coming.

Phase 4: Learning to be Housebroken in ALL Indoor Places

Often, when a foster says that the dog is housebroken, but the dog is having regular accidents at their new home it is a combination of a few reasons. The dog may, like stated at the beginning of this guide, not know how to ask to go out in this strange new place. Or the adopters are not getting the dog out as often as the foster did so the dog doesn't know to hold it for so long. Or, if the dog was crated at the foster, but left free roaming by the adopter while they are gone, the dog may have needed that denning instinct the crate provides in order to remain accident free. The dog may also be marking (see below for more info on that) their new territory or can smell the accidents/marks of a previous or current resident dog. A common reason, however, is that the dog was only housebroken up to phase 3 and just doesn't understand that he has to be housebroken in his new house as well as the foster's house. If this is the case, it usually doesn't take long for the dog to re-learn to be housebroken if the owners are diligent about following basic housebreaking rules.

It is important that once the dog is functionally housebroken (has at least begun phase 3 in his normal environment) that you start teaching him to be housebroken at all indoor places. The best case scenario is to ask to bring the dog to a friend or relative's house to spend a few hours. When you do this, you have to pretend that your dog is not housebroken and be very careful about paying attention to any signs that your dog may have an accident. Some dogs go through this very quickly, others take a bit more time. Generally, puppies go through this easier than adult dogs that weren't housebroken as puppies.

Creating a Quick Potty Break

Potty breaks should be just that: potty breaks. It is important that breaks last only 10 minutes tops before coming back in. If you spend 20-30 minutes outside waiting for your dog to go, they will learn that they can spend 20-30 minutes of sniffing and enjoying being outside before they go, which can make things difficult if you are running late for

work or to get the kids to school. It is important to keep the dog leashed during this time, even if you have a fenced in yard. You have to make sure that you control the potty breaks and they don't just see it as a way to run off and sniff the whole yard or find a stick/toy to play with. Additionally, this prevents a dog from getting leash shy for potty breaks. Many times if a dog has never had to eliminate on leash, they will be nervous about doing so and you may have trouble getting the dog to go potty on a leash outside of the home. If the dog doesn't go in 5-10 minutes, they may not have to go at all. If you are sure they have to and they are just fooling around because they like to be outside, come back in after the short allotted minutes and then crate the dog for 10 minutes or so before trying again. Crating here is important. It not only prevents an accident you believe is on the way while resetting the time clock for the potty break, but it also gives the dog time to forget about the fun of outside so that you can reset his brain for the next potty break. As stated above, it is also important that potty breaks are ONLY for pottyting. No play time, no major sniffing time, no hanging out on the porch. This will help break the dog of that annoying part of Phase 3. If you have two exits to your house, you can use one for potty breaks and one for play time. This will help the dog know which door to go to when he has to go out and will cut down that annoying part of Phase 3 much more quickly as the dog learns that indicating at the one door never means play time. Having a quick potty break leads to the dog learning to eliminate on command, which can be useful if you are visiting a friend or relative or any other building or moving house to a new environment. You can ask them to go potty before you go in so that you know they should be good for a while.

Eliminating Indoor Marking

Dogs mark for two reasons: creating a territory and communication. When your dog pees on every tree and mailbox during your walk, he is basically posting on Facebook so that all other dogs that pass by can "read" his posts. Urine marks contain a lot of information about an individual dog: health, age, breeding status, time/date the dog was there, size, etc. It is a way for them to say "Hey! I'm a 3 year old neutered male and I was here today!" and a way for them to be social and learn about the other dogs in their neighborhood. Marking is a natural behavior for dogs, and one that is important that they keep. Males are not the only ones that mark, though they do it much more frequently and regularly than females. Both of my female dogs marked, and a few of my female fosters did as well. While marking is usually urine based, some dogs will mark with feces.

There are a few questions we can ask ourselves if our dogs are marking indoors: Is he neutered? Neutering a dog can stop indoor marking behavior since testosterone encourages dogs to set strict territorial boundaries ("this is mine, and this is mine, and this couch is mine, and all of the things are part of my territory"). Are there other dogs in the house? Sometimes dogs mark because of territory issues between two dogs in the house. They may seem to get along, but only because they are creating their own boundaries. How much structured exercise (walks etc) is he getting and how frequent? Sometimes when dogs don't get to move and leave their mark elsewhere they feel the need to create their boundaries indoors. Sometimes they do it out of boredom or excess energy and it becomes a learned behavior for dealing with a lack of mental and physical stimulation.

General behavior modification for marking is very similar to housebreaking. Taking him outside frequently and having clear areas he is allowed to mark is important. Different

dogs like different things. My guy loves piles of leaves or any plants that are about eye level for him. Other dogs love trees or signs or mailboxes, etc. Find what sets him off for marking and take him out at least once every hour and praise him for marking outside. Marking in itself is a very normal dog behavior and isn't something that should be completely extinguished. Encouraging a proper place for him to mark will help him learn to differentiate between your furniture and the mailbox post. When inside, keep a leash on him so you can quickly take him out if he is looking like he's sniffing too intently on something he has marked on in the past. You can use a shaker can to startle him away from his ritual so you can get him outside to go potty. It is VERY IMPORTANT that if you cannot be watching him, he is crated or kept in an area he doesn't want to mark up. Every time he is allowed to mark indoors only reinforces that it is OK for him to do so. You need to be vigilant with him until he learns to mark only outdoors. Belly bands are a decent way to prevent a male dog from marking indoors during this training. Make sure you are fitting them and using them properly to avoid discomfort and injury to your dog.

When is an Accident a Medical Concern?

Dogs that have passed phase 3 should be able to go a reasonable amount of time before having an accident. Adult dogs have the capability to hold it for up to 8 hours. If you have an adult dog (or even puppy) that is having regular accidents after being functionally housebroken that you are sure is not marking behavior, it may be time to see a veterinarian. A urinary tract infection (UTI), kidney infection, diabetes, medication he's on (such as prednisone), or other factor may be causing urine accidents. It is important before you go to the vet that you try to obtain a fresh sample of his urine or feces so that they can test it. Look for small crystals, straining, blood or off-color or off-smell of the accident.

When is an Accident a Behavioral Concern?

Sometimes a dog is housebroken, but has an accident due to a behavioral issue. The most common one is separation anxiety. The dog is definitely housebroken, but because of the stress of being home alone or away from their people, they will have an accident. Another behavioral issue is obsessive drinking. This usually arises due to boredom or an OCD like mental disorder. The dog basically drinks so much they are unable to hold it. If this seems to be an issue, make sure you consult with your veterinarian first to rule out medical issues like diabetes. Often, to dogs, ANY attention is better than NO attention, even bad attention. Sometimes this can lead a dog to having accidents in the house just because they crave more interaction with their owner. Make sure you are fulfilling your dog's mental, physical, and social needs in order to prevent this and other negative behaviors from cropping up. Lastly, territorial issues with other pets in the house (or even a new human member of the family like a spouse that moved in or a new baby) can cause potty accidents. This is actually marking behavior that arises over the confusion of the dog's place in the new family structure and should be resolved the same way as other marking behavior.