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How to Housebreak Your Puppy

When to Begin

The best time to introduce your pup to the rules of personal conduct is when he's about three months old. If you begin much earlier, you'll probably be wasting your energy: he won't be able to control his functions. At three months, the pup is ready for kindergarten: it's time to learn that you're head of the household, and he can't just react to the instincts he was born with anymore.

How to Put His Body on a Schedule

Although it seems that a young pup is in a constant state of elimination, his body functions are fairly predictable. He feels the urge to relieve himself after he wakes up, after he eats, and after he plays. If you'll schedule these activities, you'll know when to take him outside.

First thing in the morning, take the pup for a walk. Don't let the walk turn into an outdoor play period. At this point in his life, there's only one reason for the puppy being outside. When he does what you took him out to do praise him lavishly, love him enthusiastically - but get him back into the house quickly. A three month old pup should be getting three meals a day. It's important that you schedule these meals at a time that's convenient for you so you won't be forced to alter the routine from day to day. Allow the puppy just 10 - 15 minutes to eat his meal. If he loses interest in his food in less time, assume he's full and take his dish away. Then take him for another walk. When the mission is accomplished, praise him and bring him back inside. You'll have to repeat this same routine with each meal. The purpose is to train the puppy's body to operate according to your schedule. A secondary benefit is that the dog will learn to eat when he's fed so his food isn't going to be left out for him to nibble whenever he feels like it. Naturally, between meals there are going to be times when the puppy will have to go out. If he's been romping or playing, assume a walk would be fruitful. If he's been napping, he should go out when he wakes up. If he starts acting nervous and sniffs around, he's signaling for an outing. You can't be with the puppy all the time; when he's not under a watchful eye, he should be confined. No dog will willingly soil his own sleeping quarters. You'll be capitalizing on this instinct by limiting his area to one just big enough for him to sleep and play in without feeling trapped. When he whines frantically, he just may be trying to tell you that he needs to get out. Respond quickly and take him outside.

How to Deal with Accidents

If the puppy makes a mistake when you weren't there to see him do it, there's nothing to do but clean it up. If you grab him by the scruff of his neck, drag him back into the room, and rub his face in the mess, all you'll accomplish is to make the puppy fear you. He simply doesn't have the mental ability to connect his indiscretion with your anger.

Adherents of the rub-his-face-in-it routine counter by saying, “He does understand. If he didn’t he wouldn’t act so guilty when we come back into the room.” The point is that the pup associates the presence of the excrement with punishment, but does not connect his act of relieving himself with your displeasure. It’s your job to help him make this association and this is possible only through correction, not punishment.

How to Correct the Puppy

Any time the puppy starts to make a mistake, you must act quickly. Say “No!” sharply and loudly enough to take his mind off what he’s doing so he’ll give you his undivided attention. Then sweep him up and carry him outdoors. When he finishes outside, give him lots of praise. Resist the temptation to swat him when you catch him about to make a mistake. You want his attention to be on you, not on what you might do to him.

Paper Training

Paper training is not a preliminary step to housebreaking, but an entirely different form of toilet training. Naturally, you’ll want to cover the floor in the pup’s confinement area with newspapers, but don’t encourage his substituting them for a trip outside. Treat an impending accident on the papers with the same correction as you would one on the carpet. Otherwise, the dog will learn that the paper is a suitable alternative to an outing, and you’ll never be able to trust him alone if there are papers lying on the floor of the house. But if your dog is going to spend his entire life indoors, then he will have to be paper trained. The training technique is the same as for housebreaking, except a trip to the paper takes the place of going outside. A puppy instinctively tends to return to the same place he has already used as a toilet. You can use this by sandwiching a slightly used piece of paper between two clean ones.

How Long Should Housebreaking Take?

Housebreaking doesn’t take as long as it seems at the time. You should note marked improvement in your pup’s ability to control itself in just a week. Within three weeks even the most backward pup should understand what he’s expected to do and may even whine and scratch at the door. If you seem to be getting nowhere after a month’s training, talk with your veterinarian. Your puppy may have a physical problem or illness that makes him incapable of controlling himself.