

How to Potty Train Your Puppy the Clicker Way



By [Casey Lomonaco](#) on 07/01/2009
Filed in - [Skills for Every Day](#)

Potty Problems?

Are you having trouble teaching your puppy (or even your adult dog) appropriate elimination behaviors? Don't despair. There's an excellent chance that your dog can be trained to eliminate appropriately outside of the house—and it will probably be easier than you think!



Factors to consider when training for appropriate elimination behavior are: health, sanitation, intake regulation, recordkeeping/scheduling, reinforcement of appropriate behavior, and management. Tracking pre-elimination patterns is important, too. This article will address each factor in turn, and then address some common potty training mistakes. If you have made some of those mistakes, don't beat yourself up—there's a better way right in front of you. Today is a fresh start!

Health

Make sure that there are no health problems that are causing or contributing to your dog's inappropriate elimination behavior. Before moving ahead with a house training plan, provide your vet with fecal and urine samples from your dog to rule out physical causes for the behavior (contributing factors may include, but are not limited to, parasites, urinary tract infections, and spay incontinence).

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Checking for health issues is especially important if you have an adult dog that has previously exhibited appropriate elimination behaviors, and "all of a sudden" is having accidents in the house.

Behavioral health

A dog's prior learning history is important, too. A dog's elimination behaviors are a product of the environment in which he has been raised, and are affected by his learning history.

Pet shop puppies and other dogs obtained from mass breeding operations are often very difficult to potty train. Most of these dogs spent their critical periods of development living in

their own feces, as well as those of their cage mates. Living in their own filth has been imprinted on them. It takes patience and persistence to teach these dogs more appropriate elimination behaviors.

Some elimination problems may be symptoms of other behavioral issues. Dogs with separation anxiety may exhibit destructive behavior toward themselves or property, or bark or howl incessantly from the time an owner leaves until she returns. These dogs may also exhibit inappropriate elimination patterns (often very loose stools). On the other hand, destructive behaviors or excessive vocalizations may be a reflection of boredom. In this way, a dog may be indicating that he requires more mental and physical stimulation. If you suspect that your dog exhibits signs of separation anxiety, the best course of action is to seek assistance from a qualified trainer or behaviorist.

Submissive urination and excitement urination are elimination behaviors that are directly related to a dog's feelings about environmental stimuli. In both cases, the behavior that needs to be modified is the human's. Tone down greetings to your dog or puppy. Do not scold or reprimand for the unacceptable behavior, as it can exacerbate the existing problem behavior. Just clean up, and continue to reward the dog for calm behavior.

Your behavior matters too, and may need to change. Don't punish your dog after the fact. If you find an accident in the house, simply clean it up. If you did not catch your dog in the act, he is not going to associate your punishment with the behavior. Remind yourself to manage the situation more effectively in the future, and move on! Think of "accidents" as "mistakes," because that is what they are. A mistake on the dog's part, and a mistake on your part for not sanitizing appropriately, managing the situation, or providing enough opportunities for elimination.

Sanitation

A thorough cleaning of all interior surfaces where the dog has eliminated previously is necessary before re-training can begin. Be sure to use an enzymatic cleaner made specifically for the elimination of pet feces/urine. There are many appropriate products on the market; in our classroom we like to use *Nature's Miracle*. (I'm tempted to buy stock in the company, as we go through gallons of the stuff!).

You probably have already cleaned up old messes using regular cleaning products. While you can no longer detect a smell, chances are good that your dog can, and that's a problem. The scent of previous elimination sites can function as an olfactory cue for elimination behavior. Use a black light to locate elimination sites that require a more thorough cleaning. Residue of urine and feces will fluoresce under the light.

Recordkeeping and scheduling

Never underestimate the importance of good recordkeeping when it comes to training and behavior modification/management. "What goes in must come out," and that's particularly true here! Tracking your dog's food and water intake along with his elimination will help you predict his behavior better—and manipulate its consequences.

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Excel worksheets make recordkeeping easy. Click [here](#) for a sample Excel file created just for this purpose. Here you can track your dog's consumption of food and water, his pre-elimination behaviors, and his elimination behaviors. Eventually, this detailed record will let you predict how often your dog will need to eliminate each day, and at approximately what times.

Over the course of several days, make note of every time your dog goes to the bathroom. In the first two columns of the worksheet, record the date and time each time your dog goes to the bathroom. In the third column, write "accident" if the dog had an accident in the house, or "success" if your dog went to the bathroom outside. In the fourth column, enter the letter "U" if your dog urinates, "D" if he defecates, "B" if your dog did both, and "N" if you took your dog

out for a potty break and nothing happened. In the fifth column, enter what your dog was doing immediately before elimination: sleeping, napping, eating, playing, etc. Finally, in the sixth column, enter the consequences for the dog. If he went potty outside, did he receive reinforcement and, if so, in what form (food treats, party, play, walk)? If he went potty inside, was he punished? Was the mess just cleaned up without fanfare?

At the bottom of the worksheet there is an "additional notes" section. Observe your dog before he eliminates—what behaviors do you see? Does he sniff around? Scratch at the ground? Write down these pre-behavior indicators so that you know what to look for in the future and can recognize your dog's signals for communicating that he needs to go out.

The last columns of the Excel worksheet are for intake recording. Dogs that eat on a schedule poop on a schedule. I believe that scheduled feeding times are preferable to free feeding for a number of reasons, one of which is the enhanced predictability of defecation. In the intake section, there are columns 1) to record the date and time of each meal, 2) to note if the meal was finished, and 3) to record the time/date water was offered.

At mealtime, leave your dog's food down and available to him for approximately 10 minutes; then pick up whatever food remains. You can opt to use those meals as training treats or in a food-dispensing toy such as a Kong, Tug a Jug, or Buster Cube. I suggest that you make water available every hour, or every few hours, for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Once your dog is eliminating outside the house reliably, you won't need to restrict water intake (although I still do not recommend free feeding).

If multiple family members assist with feeding and potty training, they must also record data on the forms. Print the forms and put them on the refrigerator, where they can be easily accessed by all family members who need them.

After a few days, you should start noticing patterns in your dog's elimination, and will begin to recognize his pre-elimination behaviors. You will see how many times a day, on average, he needs to go potty. Note approximately how many times he needs to urinate and defecate each day. Use this information to create an elimination schedule that will benefit all family members (two and four-legged!).

Reinforcement of appropriate behavior

Reinforcement is my favorite topic, and is sure to be your dog's favorite, too!

When you bring your dog out to go potty, proceed immediately to the same section of the yard, and be as boring as possible. Ignore your dog, letting him sniff all around.

If he goes to the bathroom outside, have a party! The "party" may include treats, affection, praise, play—whatever your dog likes. Make sure that you reinforce the heck out the behavior you like. If you provide a consequence that is reinforcing to your dog, the behavior will be offered more frequently. And, if you click when he finishes eliminating, you can eventually put the elimination behavior on cue!

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If your dog does not go to the bathroom outside, bring him back inside and put him in his crate for a half hour, then repeat the process.

There are scent attractants on the market that are supposed to attract a dog and make him want to eliminate in a certain area of the yard, but I have not tried these products. If you do choose to use an attractant, bring your dog to the scent post to start the potty process.

What about lawn spots? Always bringing your dog to the same section of yard for elimination will keep the rest of your lawn from suffering urine lawn burns. The best way to deal with lawn burn is to keep the affected areas watered well, to dilute the acidic urine, and to use lime to balance the pH of the soil.

Management: using crates and tethers

Crating and tethering are the two most frequently used management options when it comes to potty training. For most families, the use of one or both of these management tools can greatly expedite the house training process. Many times, I recommend a combination of the two techniques.

Tethers are great for when you are home and able to supervise your dog (although you should still work on crate training your dog when you are home, so that being crated does not become a predictor of you leaving the house). Tethering means tying a leash to your waist so that the puppy or dog is leashed and with you as you move throughout the house; a six foot leash will do fine. Tethering allows you to spend more time with your dog than when he is in the crate, and is a great way to form a close bond with your dog. It also provides more opportunity to start noticing pre-elimination behaviors.

Dogs are often confined in crates. When selecting a crate, get one that is the appropriate size for your dog. Ideally, a crate should only provide enough room for your dog to turn around in and lie down comfortably. The most common mistake is to buy a crate that is too large for your dog. Dogs whose crates are too large often are perfectly comfortable urinating on one side of the crate and napping on the other side.

Try to give your dog something to do when he is in his crate. Consider providing a stuffed Kong. If you can supervise the dog while he is in his crate, your options expand. Try squeaky toys, Nina Ottosson puzzle toys, Buster Cubes, bully sticks, pig's ears, rope toys—soaked in low sodium chicken broth then frozen or air-dried—antlers, marrow bones, and more.

A crate doesn't work for every dog. Another option is a safe, enclosed area—generally a puppy-proofed room with an easy-to-clean floor surface. You can also use an ex-pen on a floor with the same type of surface to contain a dog.

It's important to consider your dog and your schedule to determine the option that would be best for your unique situation. *Know your dog.* Is your dog a puppy mill dog or rescue, or otherwise a product of a high-volume breeding operation? If he has no qualms about sitting in his own filth, a crate may not be an effective tool, and the "safe spot" alternative would be better. Is your dog a puppy? The general rule for puppies is that they can "hold it" for one hour more than they are months old, but this is not a hard-and-fast rule, and differs for each dog. Dogs should not be expected to hold it for more than eight hours at any age.

It's not fair to expect a dog to hold it longer than he is physically able, and you should provide some appropriate elimination opportunity. But if you can't provide enough elimination opportunities, there are options. If your schedule does not allow you to provide your dog with enough opportunities to eliminate successfully in an appropriate manner, consider using pee pads or a dog walker/sitter of some sort. In general, I don't favor teaching dogs to eliminate indoors, but it is not right to put a dog in a situation where he cannot be successful. If you are gone longer than your dog is physically able to control his elimination, you may need to use these training aids.

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Piddle pads may be necessary if you have a puppy or a dog with health problems. While piddle pads may be a permanent household accessory for those with aging or incontinent dogs, often they can be phased out with puppies as they mature and are able to hold their bladder and bowel movements for longer periods of time. The way to do this is to move the pads closer and closer to the door where the dog will be taken outside to eliminate, eventually abandoning the pads entirely when the dog is eliminating outside. I do know of one or two dogs that have been trained on piddle paddles but now eliminate whenever papers are left on the floor. Keep this in mind if you use this technique!

Don't forget dog walkers and pet sitters. Whenever possible, a well-qualified, insured dog walker or pet sitter (or even, in some cases, a responsible and trusted friend/neighbor) is a

better alternative to piddle pad training. It's always best to give your dog plenty of opportunities to eliminate outside.

Pre-elimination behaviors

The term "tell" as it relates to poker is as defined as: "a subtle but detectable change in a player's behavior or demeanor that gives clues to that player's assessment of his hand." Many dogs exhibit their own version of a "tell." In this context it's known as a "pre-elimination behavior."

If you watch your dog carefully, you may notice that he does "x" behavior before going to the bathroom—a sniff, turning in a circle, pawing at the door, backing up, scratching, etc. The better you can read your dog's pre-elimination behaviors, the better able you'll be to provide well-timed elimination breaks, and set your dog up for potty training success.

What to do if you catch him in the act

There is no sense in punishing a dog or puppy after the fact. If you catch a dog him in the act of eliminating in the house, make an "oops!" sound, using a surprised facial expression. This is often enough to interrupt a dog mid-stream, at which point you can quickly take him to his potty spot, allow him to finish, and reinforce appropriate elimination in the correct spot. (Then go grab your gallon of Nature's Miracle and make sure you clean that spot extra thoroughly!)

Common potty training mistakes

There are several common potting training mistakes that pet owners make. Here are some of them, and explanations/alternatives:

- *Finding an accident and rubbing your dog's nose in it, or swatting your dog with a newspaper*

Any reaction after the fact is unproductive, and harsh reactions are *never* appropriate. Work harder moving forward.

- *Using walks as potty breaks*

Walks and potty breaks are two different things, at least in the initial stages of house breaking. Potty breaks are trips to the yard specifically for the purpose of elimination. Walks are walks. A walk can be used as a reward for appropriate elimination, but never end a walk following appropriate elimination behavior.

Why is it important to define walks and potty breaks so carefully? Taking your dog for a walk and then ending the walk when the dog "goes potty" negatively punishes appropriate elimination behavior. With that pattern, you remove a stimulus the dog wants (continuing the walk) as a consequence to the appropriate behavior. This response often creates dogs that "hold it" as long as they possibly can, hoping that the longer they hold it, the longer they get to walk. The better they get at this, the longer they hold it; this can produce a dog that goes for a walk and eliminates immediately upon return to the household. It is far better to use the opportunity to walk to reinforce the correct behavior than to terminate the walk after the correct behavior.

- *Not taking your dog out enough*

You are responsible for providing your dog with enough opportunities to eliminate successfully. Depending on your lifestyle, your dog's age, and/or health concerns, your financial situation, and more, you may choose any combination of the following: confinement training, tethering, dog walkers, pet sitters, or piddle pads. The most important components of training are providing ample opportunity for elimination and reinforcing every successful response.

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- *Not cleaning with appropriate products*

Enzymatic cleaners are a must!

- *Free-feeding*

Dogs that eat on a schedule poop on a schedule! If you know when your dog is thirsty, you know when your dog needs to urinate!

- *Attributing your dog's inappropriate elimination to spite, jealousy, or anger.*

The behavior is far more likely related to a medical problem, an insufficient reinforcement history for appropriate responses, insufficient opportunities for success, the wrong cleaning products, or a combination of these factors.

- *Too much freedom, too soon*

If your dog is having frequent accidents in the house, take a step back in training. Go back to where he was reliably achieving success—was there more opportunity to go out and more supervision inside?

Potty training success

What are the odds of potty training success if you follow this systematic approach? Generally, the results will be positive, provided that the elimination behavior that needs to be changed is not medically based.

Be sure to consider each training factor, your dog's history, and your own lifestyle and schedule. Use your recordkeeping data, avoid the common pitfalls, and you'll be able to modify the elimination behavior effectively.

Dogs don't want to live in a soiled environment. Every dog would prefer to live in a sanitary living space. With a little patience, some diligence on your part, a clicker philosophy, and the tools and strategies provided, it's only a matter of time until success is achieved.

About the author

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