

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

HOUSETRAINING YOUR DOG

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Animal behavior modification principles teach us that, in order for dogs to learn something new, we must isolate the particular behavior we're trying to modify. Once the behavior is isolated, we strive for many repetitions of success at that behavior. We reward each success so that the animal begins to understand exactly what we want it to do. Once the animal knows what we want, what we will reward it for, it will repeat that behavior consistently. We can then put that behavior on cue.

Housetraining your dog can be just that easy. If you put in the time and effort to:

1. reward him when he eliminates outside (you can even specify the particular spot you prefer), and
2. ensure that he never does the wrong behavior (eliminates inside) by watching or confining him or her at all times, you will be isolating the behavior of elimination, getting many repetitions of success at that behavior, and your dog will be reliably housetrained in a short period of time.

This training routine works with puppies and adult dogs. It even works for dogs who already have a bad habit of eliminating indoors, although it will take longer to break an old habit and develop a new one than it will to just develop a good habit in the first place.

Of course, during the time you are putting in the effort to housetrain you dog, you must also spend time with your dog, teach him good manners and acceptable ways to play, teach him obedience and little tricks and provide chew toys so he'll have something positive to do. All of these activities will contribute to the bond you're forming with your dog.

Get a crate and train your dog to love it; use it to confine your dog when you can't watch him. Keep your dog on a leash when you're with him indoors. Take your dog outside on a leash every time he goes out to eliminate; restrict the area he's allowed to be in until he goes. "We're out here to go to the bathroom right now – playtime, sniff time, etc. comes later," you'll tell him. Reward him with a treat when he goes, and take off the leash so he can play in the yard if he likes that; let him go back inside if that's what he wants.

Remember, we're isolating the behavior of elimination; other than completely unacceptable behaviors, we're not worrying about what else he does. We make sure he eliminates, then he gets a treat, funtime, or whatever it is that he wants. The dog does not have to come to you to get the treat; he eliminates, and you're right there to reinforce that behavior immediately, just as he finishes, with a treat and then funtime.

You're helping your dog to develop the habits you'd like him to have. If he never eliminates in the house, he won't develop that habit. Even if he has an accident or two indoors (which are really your accidents, because you should have been watching him, or he should have been confined!) the high frequency with which you take him outside to go will dictate the habit of going outdoors instead.

Suppose you work in an office. Maybe you really do, and this is easy for you!

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Suppose there are two restrooms in your building; one is just around the corner from your office, and is nice and clean, roomy, painted a pleasant color (let's say green,) very convenient and pleasant for you to use. The other restroom is down the hall, a fair distance from your office, not that clean, dimly lit, has peeling paint, and perhaps doesn't smell very good.

Suppose that, upon coming to work on the very first day of your new job, your boss tells you that you really need to use the less pleasant, down-the-hall restroom when you need to go, and avoid the clean, pleasant, close-by restroom.

“What?!” you say.

“Now, hold on,” says the boss. “Each and every time you use the restroom down the hall, I'll give you five bucks.”

So your new boss walks you down the hall right then, gives you an encouraging pat on the back, and sure enough, when you come out of the restroom, he gives you a five dollar bill. You're thinking this is an easy way to pick up a little pocket change! Maybe your boss is kind of weird, but what an easy five bucks. You have to go anyway.

Over the next few days, as you're getting used to your new job, new duties, and new co-workers, you consistently go to the restroom down the hall when you feel the urge. Due to your compliance, you're having lunch on your boss every day, you've brought flowers home to your wife more than once, and you have a new CD playing in your car! A week later, however, you have a really busy day. You're working hard at your computer, check your watch, and find that you have a meeting in just five minutes! You really have to use the restroom, too! You race out your door, run into the nearest restroom, come out fresh and ready to get to your meeting, and...Oh, no! You missed out on your five dollars! Well, at least you'll make it to the meeting on time.

You make one or two more poor choices over the next few weeks. Each time, you regret missing out on the five bucks, and your free lunch. But, oddly enough, right after each visit to the “wrong” restroom (they seem fairly similar to you!), there are a few restroom visits when your boss comes to your office just when you need to go and escorts you down the hall! The two of you chat on the way, you feel good about having made him happy even though you don't really get it about why you are forbidden to use the closer, nicer restroom, and you're assured success – your boss is making sure you get the five bucks!

Pretty soon, when you say, “I'm going to the restroom,” you automatically go to the one down the hall. You never go to the closer restroom, because you're a creature of habit, and it just feels right to go down the hall. You no longer get the five bucks every time, but you go down the hall anyway. Every so often, your boss says, “Thanks for following my rules” when he sees you coming out of the restroom. And once in a blue moon, he takes you out to lunch.

I love analogies; I hope you do, too.

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