

How to Housebreak Your Dog without Losing Your Sanity ...PART 2

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In the second half of this two-part series on housebreaking a dog of any age, Dr. Karen Becker discusses crate training, positive reinforcement, and fine-tuning for dogs with special needs.

Dr. Becker's Comments:

As I mentioned in [part 1](#) of this two-part series, there are three keys to successful housebreaking, and they're so important I want to repeat them here:

- Consistency
- Positive reinforcement
- Patience

As I also mentioned last week, the first principle of house training is to never leave your dog unoccupied – not even for a minute. For most of you, that is easier said than done. That's why I recommend crate training.

I'm a big fan of crate training and recommend it to all my dog owner clients at my animal hospital – especially those who need to housebreak their pup.

Whether your pooch is a puppy or a senior, a new member of your pack or an old hand, providing him with his very own cozy space has a number of advantages for both of you. This goes double if your dog isn't yet potty trained.

The Beauty of Crates

Why is a crate a good idea for you and your dog?

A crate allows you to work with your pup's natural desire to be a den dweller. Dogs in the wild seek out small, dark, safe spots to inhabit.

If you bring a new puppy into your home and you don't have a crate ready for her, she will try to locate a spot – under a table or chair or even behind the toilet in the bathroom – which answers her need for a secure, out-of-the-way "den" of her own.

If you were to leave her in her makeshift den, you'd soon notice she would not relieve herself there. That's because dogs are programmed by nature not to soil their dens.

In the wild, nursing wolves and coyotes teach their pups to relieve themselves outside their dens. This keeps predators from investigating inside their little homes, and keeps messes outside the sleeping area.

And that is exactly why crates are so useful for un-housebroken dogs. A dog with her own made-to-order den will not want to soil it, so by purchasing a crate for her, you work in harmony with your pup's natural instinct to keep her little space clean.

As long as your dog is getting consistent and frequent trips outside to relieve herself, nature will prompt her not to soil her den space in between potty trips.

You're halfway to the housebreaking finish line if your dog is not soiling her crate, but instead is waiting to be taken outside. The bonus, of course, is that she's also not making a mess on your floor.

Purchasing a Crate

Crate size is important. You want a space that is not too small, but not too big.

Your dog should be able to stand up, lie down and turn around in his crate. It should be large enough for him to move around in comfortably, but not so large that he can easily use one end as his bathroom and the other end for sleeping and snacking. A crate that large can actually slow down the housebreaking process.

If you're unsure what size crate you need, talk to a store employee about the size of your dog and what you want to accomplish, and he or she should be able to help you pick the right size enclosure.

You can also talk to a breeder, veterinarian or other knowledgeable source about what size crate to buy.

If you're crate training a puppy, especially a medium to large breed dog, keep in mind you'll most likely need to graduate to a bigger crate as your pup matures.

Getting Your Dog Used to His Crate

The first rule of crate training: never force your dog into a crate.

Remember Meredith from [part 1](#)? She's the 10 year-old, un-housebroken stray girl I rescued by the side of the road on my way to work recently.

We actually kennel trained Meredith because her home, for now, is Natural Pet (my clinic) and the clinic is outfitted with kennels, not crates. We started out by feeding Meredith in her kennel to associate a positive experience (food) with her new safe place.

You never want to introduce a crate, shove your confused pup into it, close the door and leave him. That's how you wind up with a dog with a raging case of separation anxiety and/or a pathological aversion to enclosed or small spaces.

At my house, we never pull a dog out of his crate, either. The crate represents a safe zone for your dog, so you never want to make his safe zone feel unsafe to him by forcing him into it or out of it.

The second rule of crate training: it's all good.

In other words, everything about the crate must be a good thing from your dog's perspective. Treats go in the crate. So do chew toys, raw bones, and very special indulgences like maybe a Kong filled with almond butter or chicken strips.

The goal is to have your dog voluntarily enter his crate – and sooner rather than later. What I do at home is drape a blanket over the back half of my dogs' crates to create a quiet, dark (den-like) environment. My dogs use their crates as bedrooms – they go into them to sleep. If your pup has had no bad experiences with a crate and you create a safe, dark little den for him inside, he might just go right in voluntarily as soon as you present his new space to him. If so, that's excellent!

Even if your dog takes to his crate right away, you still want to stick with the "it's all good" rule and put treats, toys and other goodies in there for encouragement.

Overcoming Hate for the Crate

If your dog is nervous about his new little space or has an actual aversion to a crate due to a bad past experience, you'll have to take it a bit slower. A dog that has experienced a crate as a form of punishment or has been locked up for inappropriately long periods must be gently and patiently reconditioned to view his crate as a good thing. Obviously you want your pup in there comfortably -- with the door closed -- as soon as possible in order to successfully housebreak him. But until he gets the "it's all good" message about his crate, you'll need to be extra vigilant about getting him outside to potty at frequent, regular intervals.

Make sure to leave the door to the crate open for a nervous puppy or dog. Put food rewards around the outside of the crate and inside as well so your pup can get comfortable going in and out of his crate without worry about being trapped inside.

Move his food and water bowls closer to his crate to further associate good things with the crate.

In Meredith's case, once she understood the door to her kennel remained open whether she was inside or not, she got comfortable going in and coming out on her own. Soon, she chose to go in, lie down and rest awhile before coming back out.

Because we fed her inside her kennel with the door standing open, she quickly developed the habit of running excitedly to her kennel as soon as she saw her meals being prepared. Once you sense your dog is comfortable inside his crate at mealtime, try closing the door as soon as he starts to eat. Do it nonchalantly, without fanfare. Praise him in low tones and then get busy with something. Chances are he'll finish his meal and then realize the door is closed and he's not free to leave his crate. Meantime, you're going about your business as though nothing is different. Your pup may look at you with an expectant or confused expression as if to say, "Um, hello? The door's closed. I can't get out."

You don't need to ignore him completely, but you should keep to your own business and stay very, very calm as though there's nothing out of the ordinary going on. Your dog may whine or cry a bit, but he should pretty quickly decide to lie down.

I recommend when you first start closing the crate door that you close it only for short periods of time. You'll also want to leave an interactive toy or treat inside the crate – to keep your pup pacified.

After a few minutes, when your dog has relaxed inside the crate and seems to be saying “Okay, I'll just hang out in here awhile,” that's your signal the crate has gone from a bad thing to a neutral experience for your dog. Open the door and allow him the freedom once again to come and go. Once your dog is associating only good things with his crate and feels comfortable inside it, you can close the door for longer periods of time. Don't try leaving your house for short periods until he's completely comfortable with the crate while you're home.

Establishing Verbal Cues

Back at Natural Pet, little Meredith, true to her den-dwelling canine nature, absolutely would not pee or poop in her kennel, so we expanded her territory by baby-gating her in my office. Since my office then represented a larger “den” of sorts, Meredith also refused to relieve herself in there. When I arrive at the clinic in the morning, the first thing I do is put Meredith on a leash, grab some treats, and take her outside to relieve herself.

I bring her to a specific spot each time and I give her about five minutes to do her business.

That's usually enough time for her to sniff around and decide to go.

Now, if you take your un-housebroken dog to her spot and she just looks at you ... and you look back at her ... and she keeps looking at you as if she's wondering why you're standing there looking at her, it's a good sign she's not going to do her business this trip.

What you want to do in this case is bring her right back to her crate (or room) and close the door. You've got a pup with a full bladder and full intestines and you don't want her loose in your house. That's a set up for her to fail, and the goal of housebreaking is successes, not failures.

In a half hour or so, grab the treats, take her back outside to her spot and let her try again. You shouldn't have to repeat this more than once before your pup really needs to go and will, but be prepared just in case to go back and forth from the crate to the potty spot a few times.

Don't make the mistake of assuming if she doesn't relieve herself when you take her out the first time that she doesn't need to go. Sure she does – especially first thing in the morning. She should either be in her crate or outside in her potty spot until she has done her morning business.

In the beginning, Meredith really didn't know what she was doing standing outside. She'd sniff the ground, check out the leaves blowing around, and eventually she'd just squat. She didn't realize that's exactly what I wanted her to do, so I had to reinforce –mark -- her behavior with a verbal command.

The minute Meredith started to urinate I'd say "go potty." That's how I marked the behavior I desired. The goal is to associate in your dog's mind the verbal cue "go potty" with the act of relieving herself. "Go poo" is her command to defecate. You might try another phrase that pays like "do your business" or "get busy". Whatever works!

Eventually, you'll be able to take your dog to a spot – ideally any spot of your choosing whether at home or elsewhere – and give the verbal cue you've chosen and as if by magic, she will!

Reinforcing Positive Behavior

It's easy to get overly excited when your pup potties outside right where you want him to, but you want to make sure not to get so excited that you scare him while he's in the act, causing him to stop doing the thing you're praising him for. Make sure your "go potty" verbal command is said in a low, reassuring tone.

Within three seconds of your pup finishing his business, you must give him a treat and say "good job." Give him a couple more treats and continue to praise him before you go back inside. Don't wait until you're back indoors to give your dog his treat. What will happen in his little doggy brain is he'll associate the food reward with coming back indoors rather than with relieving himself outside. You'll soon feel like you're being tricked to let your dog outside, only to see her beg to come back in to receive a reward.

That's why it's critically important that you remember the treats when you take him outside, and then reward him within three seconds after he completes the desired behavior.

For those of you with fenced backyards ...

If you happen to have the luxury of a fenced backyard and don't care what part of the yard your dog uses as a potty, you can simply let him out on his own to relieve himself. However, I don't recommend you do this at the beginning.

Number one, you won't know whether or not he's done his business unless you watch him every second he's outside. Number two, it's impossible to establish a verbal "go potty" cue if you're inside and he's outside. And finally, you can't give him a food reward within three seconds if you're in different places.

Some individual dogs and certain breeds just seem to understand from a very young age to do their business outside the house. Those pups tend to be the exceptions and not the rule, however. Your dog may or may not become completely house trained if you let him out into the yard by himself or install a doggy door before he understands the verbal cue and food reward systems.