

## Four Proven Principles of Housebreaking a Dog of Any Age...

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In this first of a two-part series, Dr. Karen Becker discusses the four key principles for housebreaking a dog of any age.

Dr. Becker's Comments:

Up to 25 percent of dogs relinquished to animal shelters by their owners end up there due to housebreaking problems. The same statistic applies to dogs seen by veterinarians -- 25 percent of behavior-related visits to vets concern toileting.

It's clear from these numbers that:

Housebreaking is a hot issue for dog parents.

Successful house training could save the lives of millions of dogs each year.

I think one of the main reasons attempts to potty train fail is because pet owners tend to look at their dogs as four-legged humans, and if a human in your household were to use the floor instead of a bathroom to relieve himself, it would be quite upsetting.

But dogs are not people, and when you get very upset with a dog that has done her outside business indoors, your tone and the actions you take to show your disapproval often have the opposite outcome of the one you intended.

Your pup has done something natural for her by relieving herself when the urge struck. You have reacted in a way that's natural for you, which is to be offended that a furry family member has just made a stinky mess on your carpet, tile or hardwood floor.

So what's the solution? Read on.

### A Personal Story

I decided to talk about house training today because of a recent personal experience I had with an adult dog that was not housebroken.

I was driving to work about six months ago and thought I saw a fox off to the side of the road in a ditch. I pulled over to take a closer look and realized the fox was actually a small, fuzzy dog that was up in years -- she looked to be about 10. I spent the next half hour trying to catch her because she was one very frightened pup.

When I got her to Natural Pet, my animal clinic, we checked her over thoroughly. The poor girl was a mess. She had mange. She had bad hips, bad eyesight, and her nails were grown into the pads of her little feet. It was obvious she'd been homeless for quite some time.

But we fixed her all up, got rid of the parasites causing the mange, and "Meredith" started hanging out with us at the clinic.

We all like Meredith very much – she's a lovely girl. But we quickly realized Meredith was not housebroken. And I'm not talking about a temporary lapse in memory or a reaction to unfamiliar surroundings. Meredith had not the first clue about the proper place to potty.

Sadly, I'm not sure Meredith has ever been inside a house or even a warm enclosure. She had no idea that relieving herself on the floor at my feet was not a good thing.

Worse still is we quickly realized Meredith had been abused. The minute anyone raised a voice to say, "Oh, no, honey! No!" when she squatted right in front of us to piddle, she'd flatten herself on the floor and cower in her own urine.

We soon realized we had our work cut out for us in house training Meredith. And it occurred to me that if I was facing the challenge of potty training a 10 year-old dog, there are some of you who are surely confronting the same dilemma with a rescue, shelter or other homeless pup.

The following housebreaking principles can be applied to puppies and young dogs as well as adults.

### Principles of Housebreaking a Dog

First, I want you to know that you can housebreak a dog at any age.

Instilling good potty habits from the start in a puppy is much easier than re-training an adult dog, but if your furry friend is older, do not despair.

There are three things that will ensure your success as you take on your housebreaking challenge, and I can't stress the importance of them enough:

Consistency

Positive reinforcement

Patience

## **Housebreaking Principle #1: Never leave your un-housebroken dog unattended.**

Not even for a minute. If you aren't actively engaged with your dog, having her in the same room doesn't count.

For example – we put Meredith behind the counter in the reception area, in a confined space, with from one to four people right there with her at all times. But no one was actively focusing on Meredith, and she relieved herself right there behind the counter.

We allowed Meredith to fail. We had her with us. We were trying to watch her. But because we were busy with other things and no one was actively engaged with her, she urinated on the floor. That wasn't Meredith's failure, it was ours.

What should we have done, since we couldn't realistically engage with her every minute she was with us? We should have used a crate.

Some dog parents believe crates are a bad thing. Not true! The fact is a crate is actually a very natural, normal habitat for a dog, as long as your pup doesn't associate it with punishment.

Dogs are den dwellers by nature. Under normal circumstances, they enjoy and will seek out small, safe, warm "bedrooms" in which to rest. If you provide your pup with his own little den (crate), and there's nothing forceful or punishing about his association with it, he'll make it his own.

If you're dead set against crate-training your un-housebroken dog, then your only other option is to tether your pup to you so that no matter where you go, she's right there with you.

The way to do this is to put a clip on the leash, put the leash on your dog, and clip it to your clothing or belt. The leash should be no longer than four feet.

Obviously, this arrangement won't be practical for many of you. It wasn't for us at Natural Pet while we were housebreaking Meredith, so we opted for crate training.

## **Housebreaking Principle #2: Feed your dog on a schedule.**

If you leave a bowl of food available at all times for your un-housebroken dog to nibble at, nibble he will. He'll nibble all day and he'll poop all day as well, and it will be next to impossible for you to figure out the best time to take him to do his business.

I don't recommend the all-day-buffet method of feeding pets under any circumstances, but it's an especially bad idea with a dog that isn't housebroken.

At Natural Pet we feed Meredith twice a day, in the morning and again in the evening. An hour after her breakfast and an hour after her dinner we know Meredith will need to relieve herself, so someone is always available and prepared to take her outside at those times.

Feeding your dog on a schedule makes elimination more predictable and allows you to exercise more control over the situation. And the more opportunities you give your pup to succeed by relieving himself outside, the faster he'll be housebroken.

### **Housebreaking Principle #3: Reward your dog for good behavior.**

In order to successfully potty train your dog it's crucial that you reward her for good behavior.

Since your pup isn't fluent in English, it's important to praise her in ways a canine understands. She can pick up cues from the tone of your voice, for example saying things like "That's a good girl, that's really good," in a quiet but loving tone.

Almost all dogs speak the language of food, so treats are also a good reward during the housebreaking process.

When your dog eliminates in the right spot outside, praise her with words and give her a treat within three seconds of the behavior. Remember that consistency is crucial, so make sure you have treats with you to reward her within three seconds every time she goes in the right spot.

After a short time, she'll recognize that she makes you happy when she eliminates outdoors, and in return she receives a reward. You want to reinforce that good behavior every time it happens, and there's no better reward in the beginning than those food treats.

Once your dog is fully housetrained, you can reduce and eventually eliminate the food treats and offer only verbal praise for her good toilet habits.

### **Housebreaking Principle #4: Don't punish your dog for mistakes.**

This can be the most difficult principle to follow, but I can't stress its importance enough.

Yes, it's frustrating, disappointing and maddening when a four-legged family member just doesn't seem to want to cooperate with the housetraining program. But in order to successfully housebreak your pup, you must avoid punishment of any kind when he makes a mistake. And he will.

I don't know where a "technique" such as rubbing a dog's nose in his excrement originated, but it's inappropriate, unhealthy, and not helpful in the least.

If I miss a cue from Meredith, or she doesn't give me one and I haven't been proactive in attending to her and she makes a mess on the floor, it's my fault, not hers. If I yell at her or use a reprimanding tone, all I'm teaching her is to fear me. She knows I'm upset at her. She doesn't know why. She's confused, but mostly she's scared.

From your dog's perspective, you're the center of the universe – his loving and kind pack leader. Except every once in awhile, unpredictably, you turn into a scary, screaming lunatic.

He may realize the “scary you” comes out coincidentally with a mess on the floor, but he does not connect his elimination behavior to your anger, especially if he made the mess several minutes or hours ago.

Even if you catch your pup in the act of relieving himself indoors, anger or force are inappropriate reactions. What can happen in that case is your pup will connect you seeing him eliminate with your anger, and he may just get sneaky about it.

In short, you cannot punish or frighten a dog into appropriate behavior.

The important thing to remember is by the time your dog is relieving himself on your floor, your opportunity for a successful toileting adventure outside has passed. All you can do is clean the mess, review what you could have done differently to avoid it, and rededicate yourself to the housebreaking process. You will succeed!

Stay consistent.

Stay positive.

Stay patient.

And stay tuned next week for the second half of this two part series. I'll be talking more about the finer points of crate training and I'll also offer some special tips and tricks to help with difficult or unusual housebreaking challenges.