



Toilet training your puppy

Having a dog that is well behaved inside the house and that can be included as part of the family is the goal of most pet owners. This has benefits for both the dog and the family! Unfortunately, if a dog is not toilet trained, it soon wears out its welcome in the house and can be, sadly, relegated to life outside.

Puppies are like young children, they need to toilet often, and they cannot hang on for very long. You want to set your puppy up so that it has as few 'mistakes' as possible. This means you need to commit to spending the first few weeks making sure your puppy has every opportunity to get it right and make toilet training a priority.

How do dogs learn where to toilet?

Puppies are naturally clean – they would prefer not to toilet in their sleeping area. This preference develops at about 3-4 weeks of age when the puppies first start to toilet without their mother's stimulation, and when puppies first become able to move around on their own.

At this very early age, they start to develop a '**substrate preference**' – this means they learn what type of surface is for sleeping and what is for toileting - so there needs to be a difference between the two. Good breeders usually have the pups confined to a 'whelping box' (their bed) full of soft bedding to keep them warm and safe, and then provide a different surface outside the whelping box.

Initially, the pups cannot travel very far, so the area immediately outside their bed becomes their first toileting area. As the puppies get bigger and more active, they move further away from their bed when they need to pee or poo. Often by this stage, they are big enough to have access to outside areas as well. By providing the type of surface that you want the puppy to consider a toilet as an adult (usually grass) at this time, puppies almost toilet train themselves!

Puppies that are not given early exposure to separate bed and toilet areas – such as those raised on one surface only (e.g., shredded newspaper in their bed, surrounded by areas of newspaper) can be much harder to toilet train. These puppies miss out on this early substrate learning and view the entire world as a toilet.

Smaller toy breeds can be trickier to toilet train – often because their small size means breeders keep them indoors much longer than larger breed puppies. They learn that toileting inside is a normal thing, and many have had limited exposure to grassed or outdoor areas, especially if they are born in the cold, wet months of the year.

Setting yourself up for success with toilet training

Decide where you want your puppy to go

Before you even bring your new puppy home, you need to have a think about where you would like it to go to the toilet. For some pet owners, as long as the dog toilets outside the house they will be happy. Other people may have a specific area of the yard that they want the dog to use.

You also need to think about how your pup will get from the house to the toilet area. How far will it have to travel? Is there free access to this area, or do you have to open doors? Most pups will quickly learn to head to the right place when they need to toilet, but if the door is closed, or if the toileting area is too far away, they might not make it in time.

If your long term goal is to have your dog inside with the family most of the time, or you want to allow your dog access to parts of the house when you are at work or school, you may need to consider installing a 'doggy door' so they can get outside when they need.

If you live in an apartment where the journey to the toileting area is more than simply heading out a door, you may need to consider an alternate toileting area for your pup as they learn. There are commercially available 'pet toilets' – most of which have a waterproof tray lined with absorbent material of some sort – or you can make your own. You will want something that is easy to clean and disinfect, large enough for your pup to turn around in and sniff, and filled with something very different to other surfaces within your home. Many people set up their pet toilet on the balcony to help minimise odours, but make sure there is absolutely no risk your pup can climb over, or get through the safety barriers or railing.



Routine

As soon as your puppy comes home, you need to try to establish a daily routine. The first few days can be super exciting for everyone, but try to begin as you plan to continue. The sooner you can get into a regular schedule of feeding, exercise, playtime and sleeping, the easier your toilet training will be.

Remember: *what 'goes in' on time generally 'comes out' on time.*

Supervision

A big key to toilet training your puppy is preventing 'mistakes'. The more times your pup 'gets it right', the quicker the behaviour is established. The only way that you can achieve this is by close supervision whenever your puppy is awake and active inside the house.

If you are watching, you will see those first signs of needing to go to the toilet – the sniffing and circling - and be able to quickly take your puppy to the correct place. If you are busy with other tasks and cannot supervise, then it is safer to confine your pup to a pen or crate rather than leave them free to roam the house (more on this later). That way you can cook dinner, check your emails, or fold the washing without the risk of your puppy wandering about the house needing to toilet and using a spot on the rug or behind the couch.

Toilet training basics

Success with toilet training your puppy takes consistency, patience and supervision. If your puppy never gets to make an error, they will be reasonably reliable in no time at all.

Errorless learning

Every time your puppy wakes up, after every meal, and after a good play session, you need to pop your puppy on a leash, grab a few treats, and take it to the toileting area. Once you reach the toileting area, you will need to stand with the puppy and wait until the puppy pees or poops (or both!). Once your puppy has success, calmly reinforce the behaviour with a pat and a small treat.

If your puppy gets to the toileting area and wants to play, just stand calmly and try not to interact too much. This is a 'business trip' not playtime.

Your puppy will quickly learn that play behaviours are not reinforced, and toileting is. You may also want to introduce a word or cue that means 'go to the toilet'. This can be useful to remind your pup what you are there for, or in future when you want your dog to toilet in an unfamiliar area – such as when you are travelling.

You will notice that we mentioned doing this '**on leash**'. This is a strategy to help you both have success. Although you will be training the puppy to come to its name at this time, the behaviour will not be reliable yet, and puppies are easily distracted – so don't set the puppy up for a fail. Popping your puppy on a leash prevents unwanted detours that could mean it does not reach the toileting area in time.

Depending on the age of your puppy, you may also need to schedule a toilet visit during the night as they are not yet able to hang on for long periods of time. The ability to 'hold on through the night' develops as pups get older. For the first few weeks, you might need to set the alarm and get up to take them out for a toilet break during the early hours of the morning.

You should also ensure that they have a toilet visit right before going to bed and avoid exciting play sessions (that are often followed by large drinks of water) just before settling your pup for the night.





Toilet training your puppy

Some people choose to confine their pup to a pen or room (such as the laundry) at night, and put paper down for them to use as a toilet, rather than get up in the night. Although this is an option, it will mean that reliable toilet training will take longer to achieve as the pup is learning that toileting inside is acceptable, at least some of the time.

Going to the toileting area and waiting with your puppy until they have toileting success in those first few weeks has to occur rain, hail or shine, day or night. Nobody likes standing in the rain in the cold and dark waiting for a puppy to pee. If you simply push the puppy out the door and don't go out with it, they may be so focussed on getting back inside to be with you, that they will bounce around near the door and not go out to the toileting area. This often leads to messes right at the door, or worse still, you let the pup back inside without knowing whether they have completed the task and they toilet inside the house.

What should I do if my puppy makes a 'mistake'?

Just as you would not yell at or punish a young child for not making it to the toilet, if your puppy messes in the house you should **never** hit it, rub its nose in the mess, or yell at it – instead you need to think about how you might have prevented the mistake from occurring!

Usually, the answer is that you were not watching the puppy closely and missed the warning signs of sniffing and circling, or got distracted and forgot it was time to take the pup outside. In a busy household, this is easy to do. In any case, you will need to re-think how your puppy is managed when you are busy, or when the kids are taking up all of your attention. Maybe you need to confine your pup when you cannot directly supervise, or perhaps you need to schedule an extra toilet visit.



Remember: once the puppy has had an accident, the area needs to be thoroughly cleaned with an enzymatic cleaner so that it does not 'smell like a toilet' to the puppy moving forward.

Some cleaners that smell great to humans actually break down into by-products that smell like urine to dogs – so an enzymatic cleaner is the way to go. Your vet may be able to recommend a suitable product as well as an odour neutraliser specifically designed to further remove 'the evidence'.

Crate training

Crate training, where your pup is confined to a pen or crate when you cannot directly supervise it, is a great help when toilet training. The first benefit is that your pup will not be wandering around your house unsupervised – potentially getting into mischief.

The second benefit is that most animals prefer not to soil their own bed, so they instinctively hang on, preferring to toilet once outside their crate. As soon as you release your pup from their crate or pen, you should take them straight to their toileting area and allow them to relieve themselves.

Teaching your pup to have 'quiet time' and sit calmly in its crate or pen has plenty of other benefits too. The crate or pen becomes your pup's 'safe place', an area with a warm, soft bed, something to chew on, and their favourite toy to play with. This helps teach your pup to be alone for short periods, and also provides a pleasant place to go when things become a bit too exciting.

It is essential that your pup sees the crate or pen as a positive place to be, and you should never leave your pup there so long that he needs to relieve himself.

Dogs Victoria has a fact sheet on crate training and its benefits, outlining how you can introduce your puppy or older dog to a crate in a positive way, and how the crate can be used to reduce stress and anxiety when travelling, at the vets, or during scary events such as thunderstorms. Visit our website to learn more.



Toilet training your puppy

Toilet training problems

Like children, individual pups can take different lengths of time to develop good bladder and bowel control. This means that the time taken to toilet train your puppy may vary. As discussed, smaller breeds may take a little more patience and time to train than larger breed pups but generally, by the time your pup reaches 6-7 months of age, they should be becoming fairly reliable.

Not long after this, though, you may have a bit of a setback as your pup hits puberty. If your female puppy is not de-sexed, increased frequency of urination is often one of the first signs that she is coming into 'heat'. Most girls have their first season at around 8-10 months of age, but it can be earlier in small breeds.

Puberty is also when male dogs begin to lift their leg and scent 'mark' (this is different to voiding their bladder). You may need to go right back to basics, with eagle-eyed supervision to ensure that your male is reminded that marking on trees is acceptable, but they are not given the opportunity to lift their leg on your sofa.

If you seem to be having problems, despite good supervision and plenty of opportunities to get it right, then you should book a visit to your vet.

Several medical conditions can affect both toileting behaviour and frequency. Things such as bladder infections, stomach upsets, viruses and parasites can make it hard for your pet to get it right. Your vet will be able to ensure that there is no underlying medical reason or provide a treatment strategy to resolve the issue.

A vet check should also be scheduled if your dog that was previously very reliable with their toilet training has suddenly gone backwards and is having repeated 'mistakes'.

