

## HOUSETRAINING: MYTHS AND FACTS

*By Maureen Ross, MA, CPDT-KA*

Fortunately, we have an abundance of helpful information to help us train our dogs today. Letting go of ineffectual techniques in exchange for more positive approaches enhances training and well-being. Yes, we can train our dogs and feel good too.

Unfortunately, learning new techniques, (remember computers or cell phones) can be fearful. Some people get wiggly, but once we know that we can respect the old, integrate the new and have fun training our puppies too, then what a breath of fresh air.

A basic understanding of how puppies live from moment to moment will help you understand how puppies / dogs navigate the world, especially when they first join our human families.

**MYTH:** "My friend told me to rub his nose in it. That's what my mother use to do... If I hit him with a newspaper... If I show him the mistake and scold him... He *knows* what he did wrong... He thinks my green carpet is grass... I need to be the Pack Leader... She gets mad at me when I leave her alone, so she "pees" all over the house to get back at me... She's testing me."

Have you said or heard any of these? The only one above that holds any "powerful puppy pee" is Pack Leader. We know more today than ever before that a Pack Leader is respected, calm, self-assured and seldom comes unglued. If they did, their pack wouldn't survive!

As a trainer / behaviorist for over 20 years, I am STILL hearing many of the above myths and I shiver. Let's look at a new way of living and learning with our dogs starting with a solid foundation – housetraining.

**FACT:** Let's agree that we all come from other people and so does "some" of our DNA, belief systems and how-to-train-our-dogs. It is okay to be aware of this and let it go. Each human and dog have a unique set of DNA all their own. Respecting generations is noble. Passing on unfair, unsafe or painful training techniques to our dogs is like us using blood-letting to get rid of an ailment. We've moved on to better, less painful ways.

Training our dogs can change our lives. It will benefit the living and learning experience. It most certainly will lengthen longevity because too many dogs are still being relinquished to shelters under the age of 3 for silly things like housetraining or lack of planning.

Let's look at developmental stages of puppies. Most pups are acquired between the ages of 8-12 weeks. Depending on the breed you have selected (mixed included), housetraining can take from a few days to several weeks or months. A safe number may be 6-months, but they can have accidents if we aren't paying attention to the environment and our dog.

*If we do not train our dogs,  
the environment will ...*

An 8-week old puppy has had someone else to look after the responsibilities of cleaning up. Mom induces the puppy to relieve himself from the time of birth by licking the pup's belly and genital area. She did not scold the pup for doing what comes naturally. She cleaned it up! Humans should too while in the process of housetraining, and scheduling successful outdoor, feeding and resting time for puppies.

Puppies under the age of 12 weeks seldom have the maturity necessary to understand housetraining, let alone self control or attention span. By 12 weeks, most pups are adjusting to their new environment. If they are left alone for long periods in a crate or confined area without an opportunity to eliminate, they will have no choice but to do it where they are.

Most new owners plan well, select and pick up their pups and gleefully take them home. Most breeders will be wise enough to send new owners home with educational packages to get them going.

With good intentions, new puppy parents have thought of everything, probably too much because of the Internet: bed, food, toys, leash, treats, Veterinarians and grooming stuff. How disheartened new owners are when their pups arrive, greet the children or cat, and proceed to christen the carpet, knock down the toddler or chase the cat. Within approximately 30 minutes of entering a new household, a pup is usually facing a lot of stimulus / activity. The pup is listening intently and hearing BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, PUPPY, BLAHBLAH, BLLLLAAAAHHHH -- OUCH, what was that for and I want my REAL MOM. The best thing for a new puppy is rest, small, safe meet and greets, and a schedule for feeding and potty time.

It is scary, stressful and confusing for pups, although the appearance is resilience and acceptance. They do that amazingly well. Pups are curious and searching for the warmth of his littermates.

Up until about 6-months old, puppies can go for no more than about 20-30-minutes between potty breaks. They need to go out immediately after waking up and eating, and before bedtime. They need to be taught where to go, when, and before she goes in the house.

Positively praising the puppy / dog when doing any behavior, including housetraining, is far more powerful than waiting until they have done something natural.

**Do not bother showing a puppy or a dog their mistake!** It is meaningful. They know their own pee and poop, so showing it to them makes humans look ridiculous. Pick up a mirror and say to yourself, "next time, I will plan better and bring my pup out more often, setting her up for success.

**ATTENTION – is Attention:** Say this mantra to yourself – I will always try to give myself and my dog positive reinforcement because we deserve it. Attention is attention, regardless of how pleasant or unpleasant. Positive attention for good behaviors is the same as negative attention for bad behaviors, BOTH reinforcing the behavior.

The pup quickly learns to revel for attention, good or bad. Bestowing attention on the puppy, in these early stages, sends a message of "WOW --- *whatever I did, it must have been great. Whenever I piddle on the rug everyone comes running over --- I'll do it again. When I bark or whine in front of company, they pet me, so I'll go for the "DOGOSCAR" next time. When I throw a tantrum, they give me a biscuit.* These humans are easy to teach."

The cycle begins and perpetuates. This is *unintentional training* and very easy to do. If you reprimand a puppy for defecating in the wrong place, you set the stage for fear of eliminating in your presence. In the middle of a rain or snow storm, this will not be fun, especially if you have a Newfie. They love cold, wet weather. Top that off with not wanting to eliminate in front of you in fear of your "hissy fits" will not be pretty. It gets easier.

**A Scene:** Even with mistakes, your puppy will learn housetraining (where to go, when and for how long). The healthy difference is that done with finesse, you can teach them to go on cue – and back inside, where it is warm and dry. Picture this: "Come on Kady, hurry up, it's cold, tinkle, HURRY – harrumph it's raining." Kady senses your anxiousness. She knows that in a few moments you may have a panic attack. She relieves herself in her designated area because she knows what she is supposed to do. You respond: "Good girl, hurry up we're going in." Inadvertently, you have taught your puppy that as soon as she relieves herself, she is quickly escorted inside; no exercise, no play, just another boring soliloquy of "good girls". **"Next time, I will take my time. I get more attention that way."**

**Let your puppy know that she is good beyond words for relieving herself quickly in the appropriate place. Take a short walk, play, and throw a few balls. Teach that going outside is in anticipation of play, not just pee. You don't have to do this EVERY TIME. Build in anticipation. It works!**

**CLEANING UP:** What you did to the puddle and the puppy after you found it makes all the difference in the world:

**MYTH:** "Quick, clean it up with soap and water! Ammonia and water is what my grandmother used. Sally says to blot it dry with paper towels, and show the puppy the towels "see what you've done". I use expensive puppy stain remover on it. The carpet is changing colors! Quick, air it out! And, the absolute worst, hit him, he'll get the message."

**FACT:** Prevent the preventable. Dogs have an acute sense of smell. No doubt after you have knocked yourself out trying to mask the odor, dogs will return to "their" spot. It is natural for dogs to mark "their" territory by urinating. Prevention is the ideal. Most of us cannot devote every waking second to watching our puppy. We are human --- not perfect and not consistent. You can be sure they are in the "land of no mistakes" by confining them to a safe, acceptable area, then putting them on a regular schedule that all family members can participate in.

If you can catch "the tinkler" in the act, pick up or escort him to his designated bathroom area, preferably outside. Doing this trains your pup to go in a specific place, not in your garden or on your deck. Do not get trapped into thinking that paper training, although convenient, will eventually teach him not to go in the house. It teaches him to go in the house on papers. If you have chosen a large or giant breed dog, you will very soon want this puppy relieving himself outside. A 12-week old Newfie puppy can create a waterfall when urinating.

**Remain with your pup** until he relieves himself, praise him, take a short walk, and toss a stick or ball. Now, go back in the house.

Clean up that mistake, but not in front of the pup. You do not want her to see you giving more attention to that mistake. Neutralize the spot with a good "Odor Neutralizer" (e.g. Fresh n Clean, Nature's Miracle). In a pinch, mix white vinegar in equal strength with water. Moisture Magnets work wonders in sopping up puddles from carpeting or floors. Spray thoroughly and apply several layers of paper towels. Blot heavily with your hands to absorb. Discard of the paper towels. Place a Moisture Magnet or more paper towers to cover and absorb.

**MYTH:** "She knows better . . . She just does it to get back at me . . . She just went outside, comes in the house and goes on the floor . . . I can't take this anymore ... BooHoo."

**FACT:** Find a good therapist, practice some deep breathing and Yoga. This is human emotion being transferred to a puppy! Puppies do not know any better. Adopted adult dogs may not have been trained to know any better either. They may have been inadvertently trained to be obnoxious. Before jumping to conclusions, explore what really is going on with yourself emotionally, and then give yourself and your dog the benefit of the doubt. The message was not communicated effectively. If it was understood, your puppy/dog would be doing it correctly.

#### **How long does it take to potty train a human child?**

I really do advocate for dogs here because their lifespan is so much more compressed than humans. They have to learn much more quickly than a human child. We never expect babies to control themselves before ages that they are capable of understanding. Children learn and try to please. Puppies do too, but are expected to do it at warp speed. They learn quickly if they are taught in an understandable way.

***Dogs who voluntarily offer a behavior  
and are praised learn more quickly ...***

Many messages are being communicated to dogs by different people, voices and approaches. The message here is to try your best to keep it simple, dog appropriate and forgiving, just as you would with a human child.

A one-year old dog is equivalent to a 15-year-old teenager. We wouldn't wait until a child is 15 years old to begin teaching them their ABC's. Begin "informal, positive training" early with "Doggy Diner" food training. Dogs being fed 2X a day, 7 days a week, will receive 14 training opportunities a day to watch-me, sit, take kibble gently and be praised for it too!

**Mantra: Teach the puppy what you want  
the adult dog to know.**

**Housetraining is an art requiring observation and creativity!** As the pup grows, develops and matures, so do his bowels and self-control. He will be able to go for longer stretches in-between potty breaks. Train yourself to be observant and watch for signs. Puppies will need to go as soon as they wake up, after they have eaten, and after they have played for 15-20 minutes. If they begin to circle, take them out. Prevention is ideal. Think ahead! Pups do not carry their Ipad around clicking in to the **"What Humans Expect" reality show.**

After puppies come home, continue planning with flexibility. Expect modifications to your original plans. This includes the supervision of children. For example, if you withhold food and water after 8:00pm, your puppy will not dehydrate before morning. This will give you a chance to scoop him up and head outside.

**Child Proof the Puppy and Puppy Proof the Child:** Children and dogs go great together, but there needs to be boundaries. If children allow the puppy to eat, drink and play *"freestyle"*, your pup will make a mistake. They get excited. Children under 12 are perceived as littermates. Essentially your puppy is playing with other pups. Set specific play and rest times to teach the pup the meaning of "relax" or "settle down."

**PUPPIES NEED TO REST.** Exercise is a healthy way to balance energy in small 15 minutes sequences. Overdoing it for "poop the puppy out" can damage growing bones, muscles, joints and ligaments.

Put a therapeutic toy or Kong in the crate, with a blanket or towel.

**Read more about [Children and Dogs at Dog Talk](#)**

Puppies / Dogs are masterful body language readers. Remember to praise a puppy when they are good. Smile and be happy. Frown when you are not. They figure out the difference. Punishment is not necessary, unless you are willing to follow up immediately with teaching. If it does not work, are you willing to up the ante? Teaching is a better way to learn.

Make a distinction between good and bad behavior, whatever that means for you. Dogs learn through repetition, practice and praise. They look for cues, seeing more than you can imagine. You have a baby on your hands, or an adult dog that does not know any better.

What I advise adoption dog parents is to imagine that this dog, whether 6 months or 4 years old is going into a brand new situation. They are confused, scared, but more often than not, resilient and willing to learn. They need time to transition, decompress and adjust to new surroundings. Less is better! Give them that time and respect. This is a lifetime commitment, so there is no hurry. Prevent them from damaging things sure – but then teach them what you want them do, chew, how to relax and tell them you love them. They understand **emotion inflection**. Give them the same rights and understanding as a baby, or someone who lacks the knowledge, deserves.

**The Unexpected:** If your dog is housetrained, then suddenly starts urinating, or *"acting out"*, first have your Veterinarian check his health. Secondly, ask yourself if anything has changed in your lifestyle that may affect your dog (divorce, death, sickness, new baby).

If everything is status quo, you are probably being tested. Reinforce good behaviors and correct bad behaviors in a firm, meaningful voice. Taking three steps forward, two steps back always puts you and your dog one step ahead. Teach new behaviors. Walk a different path. Dogs get bored too.

**MYTH:** "He knows I'm mad because he scrunches over and looks scared ... He knows what he's done because he ran away when I came home ... He's stupid ... She was the runt of the litter ... He was domestically abused.

**FACT:** Dogs have emotions and recognize even subtle body language changes. Dogs do not get mad at us, and then chew a sofa. It's silly. Dogs remember through association what happened last time, connecting the dots very quickly (I did this and got that). Dogs become anxious if they have been punished without connection. Anxiety attacks when you arriving home. Dogs are masters at timing. There are better ways ...

Dogs should NEVER, I repeat NEVER be left alone in a house for longer than they have been desensitized to. If they are and do something perceived as wrong, it is unfair to reprimand, hit or blame them.

Simply, they weren't ready or taught how to be left alone. Most dogs can be taught how to amuse themselves. Having another pet may or may not help. Dogs are crepuscular by nature. They usually sleep during the day, and are most active at dawn and dusk. We humans change their circadian rhythm to match our lifestyle. Some dogs will never be comfortable alone for longer periods so may need confinement.

Lifestyle's today predicate that a dog may be left alone for up to 6-8 hours at a time. This doesn't mean that one should be deprived the joy of dog companionship. Puppy-proof your home and human-proof your puppy. Prevent the pup from causing destruction by confining him in an area like an indoor/outdoor kennel, exercise pen, or homemade den in the basement. They need room to exercise, play, drink water, and eliminate until they can control their bladders. They require quality time with humans. Have someone come in during the day to walk, talk and play with the pup / dog.

**DAYCARE:** Popular today, but not an antidote to behavior training and modification is daycare. I won't go into this in detail with the exception of saying that you should interview, explore and be sure that day care is right your dog. It is not for every dog. Some dogs learn unruly behaviors if left for long periods to expend energy without supervision. Others are launched into daycare way too soon. Videoring is lovely, if in fact the videographers aren't editing out and actually have dog training / behavior experience. Nothing takes the place of one-on-one, owner/pup-dog training. You cannot build a relationship with a child or a dog at day care. It will help, but it is a magic bullet, any more than having brand name sneakers will make you a marathoner.

Exercise and breathing is essential to release excess energy and develop healthy bones, muscles and well-being. A well-exercised dog is a calmer dog. This doesn't mean that we should leave our dogs in kennels all day, then run the hell out of them at night. Dogs need to be conditioned in the same we do when beginning an exercise regimen with warm-ups, exercise, and calming down. Dogs love to discover, so turn even the silliest game into what your dog may perceive as an important task exclusively for him (i.e. hiding biscuits -- find it, and retrieving). My dogs love the game of [Mine, Yours, Ours – Dog Talk Media](#).

**ARRIVING HOME – YOU, NOT THE PUPPY:** When your puppy greets you --- how do you respond? Do you look around for destruction, smell the bouquet of odors or greet with a calm, "hi, I'm home, go get your stuffy. My Newf loves to carry things. It's her forte. So I have her carry a "safe" bag upstairs for me before we do anything else. It keeps her busy, me safe and groceries whole. What turns your dog on?

Ask yourself, what would you do in a situation if a mugger came up to you in a parking lot because you shopped in the Mall until closing time? Depending on my day, I might get defensive and punch their jugular. I might roll over and piddle to show the big shot how scared I am; "see, I'm submissive." I may run – if I'm not too tired or yellow out CALL 911 or HELP. I may freeze and do nothing at all.

Puppies / Dogs do the same when they are scared, excited or scared (we act hysterically). Some will roll-over and submissively pee. Others will back up, ears pinned. If pushed too far, some will give a warning sign, show a canine tooth and gutturally growl. Pushed too far, some dogs will attack. Knowing this, we can assess and keep almost any situation balanced.

**CRATE TRAINING – a free handout at Dog Talk:** Many people look at crates as cruel and unusual punishment. Others think them unsightly in their family rooms or bedroom.

I respond with a cool “baby crib” approach colored with the fact that a dog is a den animal. In the wild, wolves or wild dogs will enjoy the privacy of dug-outs. They sleep curled up in a hole in the ground, usually with their littermates.

Worrying about whether it is cruel to put a puppy in a crate is about as silly as letting a St. Bernard puppy sleep with you in bed, then getting upset when the adult dog takes up the entire bed.

Crate training is an invaluable training tool, but it is an owner’s choice! Dogs usually avoid soiling their dens. This is their living space. It teaches self control. It provides a safe haven for the pup to rest away from children. If you leave the crate door open, you will find the adult dog going back there for privacy or to get away from stressful situations.

**CRATES ARE SAFE HAVENS, NOT BAD DOG DENS:** Be sure puppies have ample time to relieve themselves before escorting them happily to their crate. Crates are safe havens, and can be used for time-outs by calmly escorting the pup/dog to their crate.

Have 1 or 2 indestructible toys (gumabones & cowbones) for amusement. Dab some peanut butter on the end of a Kong ... delicious. Bury some biscuits in a sterilized cowbone -- sheer pleasure. In a hurry, fill the Kong with dog kibble. The pup will be mentally stimulated and expend energy getting the food out, then fall asleep. I do not recommend continuous or unsupervised feeding of rawhide. Ask your Vet. The food source is unreliable. The safety of unraveled raw hide in intestines is questionable.

**REGRESSION:** It is normal to expect a temporary regression at about the age of 5 months and when pups are teething. This takes between 1 and 2 weeks. This is a normal developmental stage. Females may have accidents when they are nearing their first heat. Work through it with patience and understanding.

**MYTH:** "He is still a puppy, too young for training classes. I'll begin training when he is a year old --- I can do it myself, I've done it before --- I can use Wifi online training --- My mother and father always had dogs but never went to classes --- If it doesn't work out, we can just place him somewhere else."

**SHOCKING FACT:** Over 8,000,000 dogs are euthanized (put to sleep) every year, with the largest number being 3 years old and under, due to simple things like housetraining.

Dogs do not deserve this in today’s educated society. Puppies begin learning the moment they are born. They scramble instinctually for Mom's nipple to get that first delicious drink of milk and protective colostrum. By 4 weeks they are learning to socialize using their paws and milkteeth on their littermates. They assert themselves for the best position at the food bowl, or to get that gumabone. They are learning the do's and don'ts of canine social savvy with Mom and littermates. No, it is not acceptable to bite Mom's ear: grrrr, get your own bone.

At 8 to 12 weeks, most puppies are meeting their new family and new environment. At about 16 weeks it is strongly recommended to join a positive approach training class.

Socialization and desensitization training, with awareness, must be key on any training agenda. Bring your pup to a variety of environments, but slow and easy. Classes should offer a pleasant environment using positive, motivational methods of attention getting and control. There should be class participation, team effort and support. A good training class will include discussions on communications, awareness, behavior, nutrition, grooming, and informal, easy ways to train your puppy at home while playing and feeding. Mouthing and desensitizing techniques need to be discussed. The expectations of the owners (you) should be clarified.

Class time is for teaching you to teach your dog. The results you receive from a good training class will equal the efforts you put into working effectively with your pup at home by integrating training into everyday living. Training does not start and stop. It is on a continuum for a lifetime. People change and so do dogs as they age.

*Dogs should be socialized to people, places,  
sights, sounds and smells ...*

Training should be a family affair to minimize the mixed training messages given to the pup. **Children should be supervised if given responsibility for the care and training of a new puppy.**

If owner/relationship is exclusive to one person, it is even more important for your pup to discover the world. It's a jungle out there!

Socialization should extend beyond the "home turf". Introduce your puppy to other dogs, different environments, and different people / cultures ... anything it will be exposed to as an adult.

The first two years are formative years for your dog. By 2, they are equivalent to a 24 year-old. Begin early teaching your pup basic canine survival skills. Developing your pup into a well-mannered companion with social savvy and a good citizen of the community will ensure a longer, less stressful life.

Become an ambassador of goodwill for the "dog world" by educating others on responsible dog ownership. There are many resources available for self-learning (books, videos, workshops, Internet).

*How dogs react to training and external stimuli in your house will be much different on the outside if they have not been exposed variety, distance, distractions, durations and diversity. Teach in each room.*

Ask yourself if previous training techniques or Suggestions from friends sound feasible for you and your pup. Every human is different. Every dog is different, even within the same breeds. A common mistake is for an owner to assume that Kady will be just like "Lily", a previous dog. Just thinking this way will have an affect on your relationship with Kady. Kady is Kady. So, walk Kady's walk, and talk Kady's talk.

**LIFETIME CONSIDERATION/NOT SENTENCE:** Trying a dog on, like picking a carpet at Lowe's, is not even a consideration. Mistakes can happen. Sometimes, it is impossible to keep a dog for life changing reasons.

Before getting a dog for you, family or someone else, carefully consider the situation. Is a dog right for my family, me or elderly Aunt Flo? What breed or mix? Adopted or breeder purchased? Will we have quality time, finances and care giving strength?

All dogs are living beings whether purchased, adopted, bred specifically for a purpose or picked up from a garbage dump.

**EMOTIONS:** I am a counselor and work with dogs in Pet-Assisted Therapy. I am an advocate for my pet partner / therapist. Whenever I go through something emotional (grieving) I know that my dog is aware. They grow accustomed to us and emotions. It is unfair of me to expect them to fill huge voids

We have bred dogs for thousands of years to meet our needs. Humans and Dogs make a formidable team. Most dogs are devoted and willing to put up with just about anything from us. In return, we need to be responsible. They are a distinct species called Canis Lupus Familiaris.

Create a dance of understanding, living and learning with our dogs. Savor the benefits of living interdependently with them without trying to convert them into a human. Appreciate, not depreciate our differences.

In return, for our quality time and effort, we receive a loyal companion, who loves and accepts us almost unconditionally, without judgment or rejection. We speak, they listen. They speak, we hear. Together we learn.

*Training Should Be Fun, Fair, Flexible & Forgiving, Training Your Dog Can Change Your Life ...  
Enjoy the Journey!*