

HOW TO DEAL WITH “ACCIDENTAL HOUSESOILING”

Dr. Nicholas Dodman

HOUSESOILING

Let's face it. A new puppy is likely to have small accidents around the house, even though you may do your utmost to prevent them. No system is perfect, especially when it involves an active and curious, puppy with incomplete control over its bladder and bowels. Let's consider the three different scenarios when it comes to you, the owner, encountering a house soiling incident.

BEFORE THE FACT

If you are sitting at a table, minding your own business, and all of a sudden you notice your puppy sniffing the ground, circling, or (oh, no!) beginning to squat - stay cool. Do not suddenly jump up, yell, and charge at the puppy, as it will not comprehend such erratic behavior on your part. Instead, create a diversion, make a sound by banging on the table, or slamming a drawer, or even rattle a “shake can,” if you have one handy, to startle the little critter's sphincters into contraction. But note: the diversionary noise should not be seen (or rather heard) to come from you. Rather, it should just happen – a sudden rude interruption of what was otherwise to be a wistful moment. If the puppy turns and looks at you, you might even shrug your shoulders as much to say, “Who me?” But, at the same time, make your way over to the mite, pick it up, and physically take it to an appropriate location, whether to strategically-placed newspapers or to the great outdoors.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

If you enter a room to find your puppy midstream, or mid-bowel movement, once again, stay calm. It's not a mortal sin, it's an accident and there's nothing done that can't be undone. Again, you might want to make a diversionary noise to attenuate the elimination process and then carry or walk your pup to an appointed, acceptable location so that it can finish what it started. Later, return to the offending spot, clean up the mess with a paper towel or sponge and some water, and then treat the soiled area with a proprietary odor neutralizer. Nothing more, nothing less. Above all, remember not to punish the pup for its indiscreet behavior. It doesn't know any better. It's your job to teach the pup, not its responsibility to instinctively know what you want it to do. *Punishment will only cause the pup to avoid eliminating in your presence and that will make housebreaking extremely difficult.* Anyway, it's unfair to punish a pup for failing to learn the proper location for elimination when you are the teacher.

AFTER THE FACT

If you walk into a room or come home to find an unexpected puddle or pile on the floor, *do not immediately set out to catch and punish your puppy.* Don't yell, spank, or rub its nose in it. None of this behavior is appropriate or humane. Punishment of a pup that is caught in the act at the time is bad enough, but punishment after the fact is a disaster and will not be associated by the pup with what it has done. Its “accident” will have occurred minutes or even hours earlier and many other things will have happened in its life since that time. To have you suddenly come ranting toward it, shouting obscenities, and with your hand raised will only confirm, in the puppy's mind, that you are truly psychotic and not to be trusted. This will increase its anxiety, especially around you, and will likely exacerbate the very problem that you are attempting to resolve (i.e. elimination in the house). The correct response in this situation (though you may be fuming inside) is to coolly, calmly, and collectedly, clean up the mess and neutralize odors as described above. Then think about why the accident may have occurred. Ask yourself how long ago the puppy was last taken outside. Were you asking the impossible – for the puppy to contain itself for longer than it was physically capable? Did you feed the pup and forget to take it outside? Was it transitioning from one behavior to another and you failed to capitalize on the opportunity? Whatever the cause, try and ascertain what it was and do something about it for the future.

LAST TIPS

Positive punishment, doing something physically to a dog to deter a particular behavior, is never indicated when training puppies or, indeed, adult dogs. This is especially true when it comes to housetraining. The correct approach is to train the pup to do what you want it to do rather than to punish an unwanted behavior. While negative punishment, withholding some desired resource, has a place in obedience training, even this training technique, has no place when trying to housebreak a pup. The only thing that you, the owner, needs to do is to show the pup where you want it to eliminate and reward it richly for eliminating in that location. Simultaneously, deprive the pup of opportunities for inappropriate elimination by being cognizant and ever vigilant. Keep a regular schedule and handle clean up in a matter-of-fact way. Don't omit to use odor neutralizers when cleaning up messes as the odor of a previous soiling incident will attract the pup back to the same site as surely as a heat-seeking missile finds its source of heat. Odor neutralizers destroy the chemicals that cause the smell, thus completely eliminating this particular incitement for indoor elimination.