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Getting your puppy reliably housetrained can be a challenge but with a plan and an understanding of what a puppy is physically and mentally capable of, the road will be much smoother (and dryer).

Puppies are usually about 12 weeks old before they can 'hold it', until then they are not physically or mentally able to think before they squat. However, you still have a very short window to get them outside. Puppies need go outside immediately upon waking up, after having a drink of water or eating, after playing, before bed. For a puppy under 4 months of age, assume that she has to go out every 30 to 45 minutes when she is awake. The good news is, if its 30 minutes this week, it will be 35 minutes next week, 45 minutes the week after that....it DOES get better.

Put your puppy on a schedule. It is not the puppy's job to tell you they need to go out - it is the owners job to get the puppy on a schedule that is age appropriate. It can take some tweaking to discover how long they can hold it. Eventually most puppies give a signal that they need to go out, but if it happens before 6 months of age, you are lucky. You can easily teach them to ring a bell on the door in a few days but expect to have a few false alarms while your puppy figures out this system does work & you will get them outside. (and hey it can be fun to get the humans trained too!)

When you go outside, take the puppy out on a leash. All dogs need to learn to potty on leash even if you have a fenced yard, and if you are not out there with them, you have no idea what they have or haven't done. There are a million distractions in your yard - leaves, bugs, grass - and puppies easily forget why they were outside. Take the puppy to an appropriate spot and STAND STILL. You can spend the entire day walking the puppy around waiting for him to find the Perfect Spot. It does not exist.

Give them 2 to 3 minutes. When they go, lots of praise AND a small treat. Right there, outside. Don't wait til you come back in. Your puppy gets the opportunity to play & have some freedom when they are empty. If your puppy doesn't go in the allotted time, bring her back inside and either confine her to a crate, or attach the leash to your body. Try again in 10 minutes. No pottying means no freedom.

Also beware of creating the monster that goes like this: dog goes out, potties, owner brings him back in immediately, no play, just boring - teaches dog that pottying (and its usually pooping) means the end of walk/fun outside etc. Now you have a dog that can walk for hours & hold it because he is 'punished' for pooping, because he loses the opportunity to be outside having fun. (This applies to adult dogs too)

Daytime potty training doesn't correlate much with nighttime; if the puppy is sleeping, they can hold it much longer. A general rule of thumb for a sleeping puppy is potty breaks every 1 1/2 to 2 hours for every month of age, plus one hour; ie; at 8 weeks for up to 4 to 5 hours; at 12 weeks for up to 5 1/2 to 7 hours. Smaller puppies have smaller bladders.

All puppies have strong substrate preferences - they like to pee on what they are used to. Keep this in mind when you get your new puppy - what kind of set up did the breeder have? If they start pottying on paper, they are going to look for paper. Sod or litter are probably the two best options for puppies while at the breeder's house. Another thing to be aware of when you live in northern climes - the huge difference between that substrate in January and in July! Many puppies have accidents when the grass or snow disappears.

If a puppy is peeing in their crate and strict time management doesn't work, try taking the bedding out. Many puppies will use the bedding to soak up the urine. With no bedding, things aren't quite so cozy if they pee. You may also have to limit water intake in the evening but be careful as you don't want your puppy to get dehydrated or tank up on water when they can. Check with your vet about limiting water.

Realize that ANY schedule changes in your household will affect your puppy's housetraining. I always get a lot of housetraining problems in early September - right when kids go back to school. Puppies are usually about 80-85% housetrained by five months. At this point, many owners think their puppy IS trained and relax their management - and the puppy makes mistakes. Most puppies are not "100%" reliable until 10 to 12 months. Close, but not quite there yet in all situations.

If you feel like you have tried everything - go see your vet. Urinary tract infections are much more common in puppies than most people realize.

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Pees in a Pod - litter box training

My last litter - a singleton - was born in the middle of a very cold Minnesota winter. Mom did a great job of cleaning puppy those first 2 1/2 to 3 weeks, but once this pup had open eyes and was beginning to get mobile, I set up a litter box. I bought an actual litter box for the main one, but you can make your own, just be sure there is a place that is low enough for a very young puppy to get into the box. For litter, I had great success with the Purina Second Nature. It kept things from getting stinky and my puppy was not at all interested in eating it (and yes, she did chew on most things!) In other seasons, I would probably get sod for the box to develop a good substrate preference for grass. When it was warm enough for this puppy to go outside, her original choice was to pee on rocks!

Once the box was up, I put the puppy in it as soon as she woke up, tons of praise when she pottied in the box, and I let her find her own way out. Within a few days, this 3 1/2 week old puppy was making the choice to go to the box to potty. As she got older and had more freedom in her puppy play area, she ALWAYS found her way to the box and had no accidents anywhere.

I also set up a second box in another level of the house - for that I took a low cardboard box, cut out a place for her to get into the box, lined it with a puppy pad and put the litter over that. She never had access to that box unless I was around, didn't need her shredding the puppy pad and tossing litter all over. Poop cleaned up as soon as possible, clumped up areas cleaned out a few times/day and new litter every 2 to 3 days (remember this is 1 puppy, your mileage may vary)

Once I was back to work and she was home alone for more hours than she could hold it, I set her up in an expen with the litter box in the far corner. That set up lasted for several months and she would use it when I was at home if I was being negligent in getting her outside on her schedule! She transitioned easily to pottying outside, but the box was there as back up. A nice option too in bad weather.

The key time for setting up the box is about 3 weeks - open eyes, mobile puppies. People who have tried to litter box train an older puppy they've brought home - 8 to 12 weeks - have not had much success - back to that substrate preference again.