

Training a “Potty” Word

Having a functional “potty word” (“Go Potty,” “Do Business,” “Empty,” or whatever word you like) is a Godsend for communicating with your dog. The two mistakes people commonly make are: (1) not training one at all or (2) attempting to train one, but not realizing that if you start out with your new puppy by saying “Go Potty” every time you go outside on the grass, the puppy will naturally think that “go potty” means “let’s wander around on the grass for awhile.” Not so useful.

In fact, done correctly, a potty word (I hesitate to call it a “command” since it’s not really enforceable) can save you a LOT of frustrating time spent in downpours, etc. The key to this “command” is that for about one to two weeks (depending on the dog) you need to be with him if possible EVERY time he eliminates and EVERY time you praise him with the potty word (“good go potty”) ONLY when he is actually in the act. Remember Helen Keller and the Water Pump? This is how he makes the connection of what the heck you are talking about. AGAIN: you NEVER use the word except when the dog is in the process of eliminating.

After about two weeks, you can start backing up your use of the word incrementally: so when you can see the dog is circling, hunching, whatever and is JUST ABOUT to “do it” you can say “go potty” followed by “good go potty!” repeated as he is doing it.

Over a period of a week or so, you can back this up to when you are going out the door, and eventually, when your dog goes to the door and looks at you, you can say “need to go potty?” and he should look back at the door or otherwise indicate “yes.”

One of the beauties of this command is that once it’s reliably trained, if you take your dog out, give the command, and nothing happens within about five minutes, you can be reasonably confident that the dog in fact did not need to go.

Note that a lot of dogs become accustomed to a “going” on a particular substrate, such as grass. I had a client with a puppy one winter whose puppy got accustomed to going in snow and when it melted they had a problem . . . ! Closer to home, Joey initially would not go on the river stones in our side yard, which is where we have the dogs go when the backyard is muddy. We simply trained the potty word on the grass in the backyard (he learned in about a week) and then it took just a little work one afternoon to get him to understand that he was supposed to do it on the stones. It would have taken much longer without the ability to communicate.

One final thing: I don’t usually give treats for elimination. I generally find praise is sufficient. The exception to that is the occasional dog who has been over-corrected (read: had the crap scared out of him) for eliminating in the house to the point that he has concluded that what is dangerous is to eliminate *in front* of the owner. In that case, the owner needs to do whatever possible to encourage the dog to eliminate (outside) in front of him again.