

Potty Training your Chin

By: Linda McNamara on behalf of the performance committee

First, stop laughing... it really *is* possible. It does take some work and commitment but it is do-able; not just by those of us who make a hobby of training our Chin but by anyone willing to put the time in.

This article addresses potty training an older puppy or an adult; starting with some dog psychology and training philosophy and finishing with potty training specifics.

Why do dogs potty in the house?

If you can understand WHY your Chin potties in the house will help you find the patience to hang in there through potty training.

Jean Donaldson, in her book Culture Clash, tells this story:

Imagine there is a race of superior beings from outer space who keep humans as pets. You live in one of there homes and are well loved and well cared for but you do not understand their language or culture. Around the house are white porcelain vessels that have, what looks to you, like a seat on the top. You find yourself in need of going potty so you decide to utilize the white porcelain vessel. All of a sudden, your benevolent keeper comes storming into the room, angry, yelling and punishing you for doing, what appeared to you to be a normal part of your life. This would be very confusing to you.

Dogs instinctually want to potty on something that is soft and absorbent (grass, dirt...). Carpet certainly falls into that category. To them, pottying on carpet makes perfect sense. They are not trying to be bad – they are just doing what they are hard-wired to do.

So, as you are potty training, remember, you are teaching your Chin to behave in a way contrary to their biological programming. Be patient. You can be successful but it will take some time.

Why are toy dogs harder to potty train than large dogs?

My husband and I recently adopted a Shepherd Mix puppy (about 8 months old). Potty training her consisted of taking her to the back yard (once) showing her where to potty and praising her (once) when she pottied correctly. She had 2 accidents inside, was corrected and has been perfect since.

This is NOT the experience I've had potty training my Chin. It's a lot more work and I've wondered why that is. I asked my agility instructor, who trains dogs professionally, and she told me this...

"Every time the dog is able to make a mistake without being corrected, it is positive experience. She potties in the house, no one says anything so in her mind, pottying in that spot is ok. Because of her size, it is easy for a small, unsupervised, uncontained dog to potty without you noticing and thus without being corrected. Every time she does this, she is positively reinforced and believes that she is correct. She is being "potty trained", just not in the way you intended."

Another factor is that a small dog makes a small mess. It's easy to clean up and not really a big deal – especially if it's a Chin puppy (poop so tiny it is almost cute). But eventually, we find ourselves grumbling as we clean up and start to feel annoyed, no matter how small the mess is. Next come statements like "Chin just cannot be potty trained!". This is when you need to refer back to the paragraph above. You Chin IS potty trained – by choosing the easy path of cleaning up the little mess rather than putting in the time into training the behavior you wanted, you reinforced the wrong behavior. That's not your Chin's fault.

Correctly correcting incorrect behavior:

It is very important to understand how dogs process information to succeed at training. Dogs are not people. They do not think the way we do, they do not experience their world the way we do and they do not make decisions the way we do. When we endeavor to teach, we will fail if we do not take this into consideration.

Dogs live in the present. This does NOT mean that dogs don't remember the past. It refers to their ability to understand cause-and-effect relationships. Dogs are only able to draw a cause-and-effect conclusion between two events that happen within a 15 to 30 second window in time.

What does this mean in terms of potty training? If you catch your Chin pottying in the house and can correct her within 15 to 30 seconds, she will understand that you are unhappy with her pottying in the house.

If you find an accident, you do not catch her in the act but you proceed to correct her, she will understand that you are unhappy and she will know that the potty is hers (you don't even have to rub her nose in it) but she will NOT be able to connect the two. She IS NOT CAPABLE of understanding that you are angry BECAUSE OF her potty. This is true of the very smartest dog on earth down to the most dull. It is not good or bad. It is how they are and we need to recognize that so that our expectations are fair.

Keep that in mind at all times. As angry as you feel, if you do not catch her in the act, correcting after the fact can, at best, work to make you feel better. At worst, she will be drawing an incorrect conclusion: You're angry, she's sitting on her favorite stool (these 2 events ARE occurring in the 15-30 second window) thus you must be angry that she is sitting on her favorite stool. Sounds strange but it is true.

Important info about praise:

The 15 to 30 second window of time is just as true for praise as it is for correction. Your praise/reward needs to be fast and within the window for it to have the impact you intend.

Dogs like to make you happy and they LOVE food. Use both of those facts to your advantage. Be ready with lots of happiness and LOTS of special treats. When you're potty training, I don't think you can over do either.

Now – specific ideas for potty training:

1. Don't let her make a mistake:

Until your Chin is potty trained, don't let her fail. As mentioned previously, every error is positive reinforcement. Prevent mistakes with the following ideas...

- a. Tethering – also known as The Umbilical Cord method. Keep your Chin on a leash in the house until she is reliable. Don't let her out of your sight. Once she is becoming reliable at letting you know when she needs to go out, let her drag the leash.
- b. Take your Chin out on a regular schedule. Start going out every half-hour to hour so that when she does have to go, she will go in the right place. Once she is becoming more reliable, you can go longer between outings but watch for any sign of needing to potty and rush her outside.
- c. When you are not home and cannot watch her, keep her in a part of the home that will clean up easily and not hold scent (some place without carpet). Use a baby gate or xpen. If you have carpet in every room of the house, consider buying a small piece of linoleum to use under an xpen.
- d. There is nothing wrong with crating the Chin overnight until she is reliable. Granted, Chin hate being crated but a little short term pain will be better than having to give up the dog you love. Make sure the crate is just large enough to sleep in, get up, turn around - but no larger. A dog typically will not potty where he sleeps. If the crate is large enough to potty in one place and sleep in other place, that won't help.

- e. If you're really against crating, use diapers until your Chin is reliable. Boys can use belly bands. For girls, use regular newborn diapers and cut a hole for her tail. Again, you don't want to give your Chin a chance to be unsuccessful.

2. If she makes a mistake:

If you can correct her while she's in the act or within 15-30 seconds, do so. Don't be mean or go off the deep end, but firmly tell her that this is not the behavior you want. Use a low pitched voice. Keep it brief.

If you miss the window, you must then firmly tell yourself that you will be more vigilant in the future.

In either case, clean it up so she can't smell it. Nature's Miracle is an excellent product that removes smells. Keep this (or other similar scent remover) on hand and clean up accidents ASAP.

3. And, when she gets it right... PRAISE PRAISE PRAISE:

Every time the Chin potty's outside, you have to behave as if she has just won the lottery! You clap, praise her, make a HUGE deal out of it and have treats ready to shove in her mouth when she finishes. Use very high pitched voice when lavishing praise and very high value treats. I recommend having a high value treat that she can ONLY get by pottying outside. A favorite at my house is liverwurst. (A note on praise... if you don't feel like an idiot and are not worried about the neighbors watching and wondering – you aren't praising enough.)

4. Help her succeed...

- a. Know the Chin's potty schedule. Dogs typically potty first thing in the morning and immediately after they eat.
 - Plan to potty her first thing in the morning and last thing before bed. CARRY her outside in the morning - don't let her have a chance to make a mistake on the way out.
 - Potty her the last thing before you retire to bed.
 - Go out immediately after every meal.
- b. If you free feed – stop. Typically, input stimulates output. You need to have control over the input so that you can have control of the output. Do not leave food out while potty training.
- c. Take previous "output" and put it in a place in the yard where you want her to potty. She will smell it and recognize that as an appropriate place to potty.

5. Continue to support success.

After you are consistently getting the behavior you want, you will be tempted to relax. This is where many people fail. While you should go from rewarding your Chin for EVERY potty to intermittent rewards, you should never ever completely stop rewarding and praising. Occasionally, even surprise your well trained Chin with a "potty party" just to remind him of exactly what you like.

No one said potty training a Chin is easy, but everyone should agree that it is worth the work.