

Crate Training Your Dog

Everyone says I should get a crate for my dog. Why? I don't want to put my dog in a cage! If dog crates were designed to look like little dog houses, it might be easier to convince people that they're not cages! Let's talk about what a crate really is and how they can improve your relationship with your dog.

Long ago, when dogs were still wild animals, they often slept in dens - shallow holes they dug in the ground hidden away in places where they felt safe from predators. These were small, dark places, just big enough to turn around in and to lie down comfortably. Even after centuries of selective breeding and living in people's homes, dogs still retain some of their ancient instincts. One of these instincts is the desire to have a den - a small, cozy place of their very own where they can feel safe and secure.

A "crate" is just a modern version of a den. In other words, it's a doghouse within your house. Just as you enjoy having your own room where you can go for peace and privacy, your dog likes having his own room, too! As well as giving him a safe, cozy place to stay, crates can make training your dog a lot easier.

Housebreaking goes much faster when you use a crate and destructive chewing becomes easier to control. Traveling is safer for both you and your dog when he's in a crate. As you may have unhappily discovered, it's very hard nowadays to find a motel that allows pets. Many motels will allow crated dogs. Finding a rental apartment that will allow pets is becoming next to impossible, but many landlords can be persuaded to accept tenants with crate-trained dogs.

How do I get my puppy used to a crate?

I've tried putting him in it but he cries so much, I let him out after a few minutes. He doesn't like it, and I feel sorry for him. If small children and puppies could have their way, they'd choose to run free all the time without any restrictions. Unfortunately, because they don't have the maturity to handle that freedom and keep themselves out of trouble, they have to learn to accept periods of confinement. The key word is "accept" - it doesn't mean they'll like it right away. Most dogs bark and complain during the first few days. Once they begin to accept this new restriction on their freedom, they quiet down and learn to enjoy it. Growing puppies alternate periods of activity and rest throughout the day. There's no reason they can't do their resting in a crate, like a baby taking a nap in a playpen or crib. By keeping the puppy on a regular schedule of feedings and exercise, you can control his natural rest periods. If you put the puppy in his crate when he's already tired and ready to settle down, he'll get used to his new "bedroom" faster.

In the beginning, he should only be expected to stay in the crate for 2 hours at a time and overnight. During his periods out of the crate, your puppy needs plenty of playtime and attention. I like to give puppies at least an hour between crating periods where they're played with, loved, allowed to explore and romp. This burns off their boundless puppy energy and helps them understand that crating is only a temporary thing.

Special toys and treats help make his "room" a pleasant place to stay. Give the puppy a small treat every time he has to go into his crate. Better still; toss the treat into the crate so he can jump in after it. (If you want him to learn to go in the crate on command, say "Kennel" when you toss the treat. He won't understand right away but before long he'll put three important things together in his mind - "Kennel" + Crate = Treat!).

You've given him a reward for going into the crate, now you need to give him an incentive to stay in there quietly. Make his "room" comfortable. Get him a soft but hard to destroy blanket or bed. Get him a selection of toys. Don't give them all to him at once just one or two at a time. Rotate the toys. Puppies get bored easily and switching the toys around makes them seem new and exciting. Teething puppies love chew toys, and all dogs love a sterilized beef bone with peanut butter stuffed in the middle. They can spend hours trying to clean it all out.

Dogs learn quickly when their behavior is associated with a reward. Behavior that doesn't result in a reward often disappears when there's nothing in it for them. It's normal for many puppies to bark, whine, howl, or throw tantrums when first being crate-trained. If you let your puppy out of the crate while he's upset, you'll be rewarding him for bad behavior. The next time he's supposed to go in his crate, he'll cry and bark again because that's what got him out the last time.

For many puppies, just ignoring their complaints is enough to make them stop. If it doesn't get them anywhere, they soon give it up and find something better to do like sleep or play with a toy. Stubborn puppies might need a harsh-sounding "No!" and a rap on the top of the crate to help them get over their tantrums. Whatever you do, don't take him out of the crate until he's quieted down.

Where can I find a crate?

The most likely place to buy a crate is at your local pet supply store. For the largest selection and sometimes, the best value, a wholesale pet supply company may be your best bet. You can find these companies through ads in popular dog magazines or online. It pays to shop around. Crates come in several styles and materials and some are sturdier or more convenient than others.

What kind should I get?

The most popular crates are made of plastic or heavy welded steel wire. Plastic crates are molded two-piece units with ventilation areas along the sides and a welded steel wire door in front. They're lightweight, portable, and are easily taken apart for storage or travel. Most plastic crates meet federal regulations for airline travel. The quality of plastic crates varies between manufacturers and you'll need to get one sturdy enough to resist chewing.

Wire crates are very popular and depending on your dog's needs, may be a better purchase than plastic. You'll need to shop more carefully for a wire crate because quality and style vary greatly. Some of them are flimsy and not meant to be collapsed for storage. Others, advertised as "collapsible," do so only with great difficulty and don't fold down to a convenient size. Look for sturdy crates with heavy gauge wire that are easily folded down into a "suitcase-style" shape for transportation and storage.

How big should it be?

A crate need only be big enough for the dog to stand up, turn around and lie down comfortably. I like them to be just long enough for my dogs to stretch out on their sides to sleep. Growing puppies can be a problem when buying a crate. Not everyone can afford to buy a new one for each stage of growth, but too large a crate can make a puppy harder to housebreak. Fortunately, dividers are available for some brands so you can shrink and expand the puppy's space as needed.

How much will it cost?

You can expect to pay \$50 - \$150 for a quality crate for a medium to large dog. While it may sound like a lot, a good crate will outlive several dogs and quickly pays for itself in peace of mind and undamaged carpets, furniture and belongings.

How does a crate make housebreaking easier?

Along with their natural instinct to sleep in a den, puppies are born with the instinctive desire to keep their dens clean. Given the opportunity, most puppies will seek out an area to relieve themselves that's far away from where they eat, play and sleep. Using a crate takes advantage of this natural tendency and helps the puppy to learn to control himself in between trips outside. During the first few months, puppies require almost constant supervision, something that's hard to do with our busy lifestyles. Using a crate helps you to prevent accidents when you can't watch your puppy every single minute. Housebreaking is easier to accomplish when accidents are prevented in the first place, rather than correcting the puppy afterward. Using a crate, a place that the puppy is naturally reluctant to use as a bathroom, combined with a regular feeding and exercise schedule will make housebreaking go faster as well as saving your carpets and your sanity!

My dog chews up everything in sight when I'm not home! How will a crate help that?

Just as you crate an un-housebroken puppy to prevent accidents when he can't be supervised, the same applies to a dog that chews or gets into mischief when you can't be there to watch him. Confined to a crate, a destructive dog is limited to chewing only on the toys you give him, not your cushions or woodwork!

I've got an adult dog that's never been in a crate before. Is it too late to train her?

No, it's never too late! Older dogs can often learn faster than puppies. At first, let her smell and investigate the crate with the door open. Feed her meals in it and have her jump in and out of it for treats. Just as you would with a puppy, you should make the crate a comfortable place to be and keep crating periods short in the beginning. Once accustomed to them, many dogs enjoy spending time in the crates even when they don't have to. Crates are a favorite place to retreat with a new toy or get some relief from a rambunctious puppy or child. There are several crates around my house and at any given time, you can find dogs napping in them, the doors standing wide open. Would they react this way to something they thought of as a cage?

Some people say that using a crate for discipline makes the dog afraid of the crate, but others recommend the crate for this purpose. Who is right?

A crate or dog cage can be a wonderful training tool when used correctly. Used incorrectly, or over used, it can be an instrument of fear and torture. Every dog, especially new puppies, should have a crate. Dogs are descended from wild canines that used dens for shelter. Most wild canines dig the den, a small, cozy, and safe haven to sleep and rear puppies. In our homes, domesticated dogs appreciate such a haven or den that should become the dog's 'room,' a refuge where the dog can rest and feel safe.

A crate is probably one's best tool when it comes to the discipline of housetraining. The "discipline" aspect comes from a dog's innate urges not to urinate or defecate in its den or bed. Even young puppies prefer to move as far away from their sleeping quarters as possible to relieve themselves. Usually, a puppy or dog that has an elimination accident in his crate was sick or couldn't wait any longer.

Crating a puppy or dog over night, or when the family is away during the day, also administers a passive form of discipline by preventing an energetic, curious dog from chewing up human belongings or electric cords. A crate keeps the dog safe, and out of trouble and is handy at times when it is necessary to have repairmen in or during holidays when the house is full of company.

Bad crate discipline occurs when the crate is over used, or misused. Yes, a crate does get the dog out of the way occasionally, but some people misuse it to get the dog out of the way, most of the time. One study about dog surrenders to shelters found that dogs crated for long periods were more at risk for surrender because people used the crate to put the dog "out of sight, out of mind." Crating a dog for eight hours overnight or while you are at work is not cruel, especially if the dog is taken for a long walk or jog prior to crating. People who continuously crate a dog for longer periods should question why they wanted a dog in the first place.

It is common to punish a human child by sending him to his room. Dogs are not children in fur coats, and this method is futile in teaching Fido a lesson. An all too common scenario is:

1. Fido chews up a shoe (messes in the house, digs a hole, etc.)
2. Owner yells "no," grabs the dog, and puts him in his crate.

Let's analyze this from Fido's point of view. Whether caught in the act or punished minutes or hours later, Fido was probably not aware that the act he was committing was that horrible in human terms. He understands only that his owners are upset and that he came when he was called, "only to be punished for something he didn't even know was bad."

When disciplining a dog for committing bad behavior, it is important to catch him in the act of doing the deed. Dogs live in the moment and do not associate something they did five minutes or a half hour ago with the present. Often, an owner finds the mess and punishes the dog, not knowing whether the 'sin' was committed five minutes, a half hour, or longer ago. The dog associates with being called over, punished, and then shoved in a crate as "I came, I got punished for it, and I certainly won't make the mistake of coming when called again." He also learns that the crate is a negative, scary place.

Used for the discipline of keeping the dog safe until trustworthy, and housebreaking, a crate is a wonderful training tool. Used inappropriately, it can cause distress and hamper training progress. Used correctly, it may look like a crate to you, but to a dog, it's his private room.

Some hints for crate use:

- When telling the dog to go into his crate, use a command such as "kennel."
- To get the dog accustomed to staying in the crate, give him meals or treats in the crate with the door open.
- Put some washable bedding and a toy in the crate for comfort.
- When using the crate for discipline or to interrupt unacceptable behavior patterns, limit the incarceration to 10-15 minutes.
- If the pup or dog soils the crate, don't scold. Instead, make arrangements so he's not left alone for such long periods.