

Behavior Tips: *Crate training*

Provided by:  ACVB American College of Veterinary Behaviorists

Should you use a crate?

The use of crates is controversial. Some people think it is cruel to imprison dogs in a space not much bigger than the animal. Others feel that a dog is calmed in a crate and that crates are a valuable tool for training. The answer is that both opinions are correct. Like any tool a crate can be misused.

Types of crates

There are two basic types of crates: wire crates



and crates with plastic walls, top and bottom.



The plastic ones are often called airline crates because those are the ones in which airlines will accept a dog for travel. The plastic crates are better for some dogs because the solid sides are similar to a den or nest, which may comfort a dog. Likewise, the fact that they are dark may encourage the dog to relax and sleep.

Using a crate for travel

Crates are good not only for air travel, but also for car travel. The dog cannot jump around the car distracting the driver and endangering himself if the car stops suddenly. A dog who barks ferociously at every passing car or animal may be quieter in a crate when he cannot see scary things outside. Covering the crate with a sheet may further help. Lavender on a cloth in the car may calm some mildly anxious dogs.¹ When you arrive at your destination, even a motel room, your dog has a safe, familiar environment and is more likely to sleep quietly even in a strange place.

What about puppies?

The best use of crates may be for puppies. The new puppy can be housetrained most easily using a crate. To make the crate appealing for the new puppy a stuffed dog with a heartbeat and a heat source (see for example <http://www.snugglepetproducts.com>) can be placed with the dog in the crate. An inexpensive heat source can be made using a soda bottle with warm water covered with a towel.

If the puppy sleeps in the crate beside your bed, you will hear any cries and can let him know that you are nearby. This closeness allows the puppy to feel secure while giving you the chance to reward calm behavior. If the puppy starts to fuss, you are able to take him out quickly which will help with housetraining.

¹ Wells DA. Aromatherapy for travel-induced excitement in dogs. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2006;229:964-967.

Puppies need to be taken out to eliminate when you and he wake up in the morning, after he eats, after he plays, and after a nap. The rule of thumb is that a puppy can wait the number of hours as his age in months plus two so that a two-month-old puppy should be taken out every four hours. If you stick to this schedule, have your puppy on a lead and praise him each time he eliminates, house training will proceed quickly and smoothly.

Unless you can directly supervise puppies, crates provide safe havens for them, and people often have 2 or more crates: one so the puppy can be safely in the social swirl of the house, and one in a quiet spot. When the dog is in his quiet spot people should not disturb him unless feeding, walking or playing are being suggested. We all need quiet time, but no puppy should spend most of his time in a crate.

Can you use crates with adult dogs?

Older dogs should be introduced to a crate gradually. First the crate should be on the floor with the door open so the dog can explore it. Placing treats and toys in the crate for the dog to find can help. If dogs are able to happily eat their meals in the crate with the door open, you can move to the next step. Begin to close the door of the crate, at first for only a minute but then for gradually increasing periods of time. During this time he should be able to see you. Only when he seems comfortable in the closed crate should you move out of view.

Can crates be problematic or cruel?

Yes. Growing dogs who spend too much time in crates that are tight or have slick surfaces may develop skeletal deformities. All dogs at all ages should be able to stand up without his or her head touching the top, and be able to turn around and stretch out fully. Any dog who spends more time in the crate than interacting with the family is likely not getting sufficient social interaction. Dogs who use crates to hide from other dogs or people may have a problem with fear that must be assessed by your veterinarian and/or a specialist.

If you put your dog in a crate and he bites at the wire and digs at the floor it is indeed cruel to confine him in one. This can happen when a dog has separation anxiety or other anxiety disorders. Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit a constellation of behaviors: barking or howling; destructive behavior usually aimed at doors or windows; and in the worst cases drooling, urinating and defecating. To avoid the destruction an owner may put the dog in a crate, but some dogs panic in crates which just changes the focus of the destruction to the crate and the dog, himself. When dogs panic in a crate they can tear nails, break teeth, cut their pads and skin or become physically trapped in grating. Dogs can sometimes push out the tray on the bottom of the crate, exposing and damaging the carpet or floor. Dogs who panic may vomit or have diarrhea and then become covered in feces and vomit because they cannot get away from it.

It is cruel to contain dogs in crates if they become distressed in them. These dogs need and will benefit from help from your veterinarian and/or a behavior specialist.