

Behavior Tips: *Crate Training*

Provided by:



The use of a crate is a controversial, and sometimes contentious, topic. While some people think it is cruel to confine a dog to a crate, crates can be an extremely beneficial tool in a dog's training program, particularly for puppies. With proper preparation, most dogs find their crate a comforting safe place. However, it is important to note that some dogs show extreme distress when confined in a crate even after reasonable training steps.

Why use a crate?

There are a variety of benefits to using a crate for both puppies and adult dogs.

Crates may be most useful for puppies. They allow for a more effective house training protocol and help to keep the puppy out of trouble when it cannot be supervised. A crate prevents the puppy from chewing on undesirable things or potentially ingesting toxic or dangerous substances. The crate also gives the puppy its own space where it can escape the hubbub of activity in the house or the unwanted attention of certain individuals such as visitors or children. Children should never be allowed to play in, or near, the puppy's crate, even if the crate is empty.

Crates also give your dog or puppy the safest way to travel in your car. Confining your dog in a crate can prevent injuries from sudden stops or accidents. Crating the dog also prevents the dog from interfering with you while you are trying to drive. (It is unsafe even for small dogs to ride in your lap while you are driving.) Crates can help reduce barking at outside stimuli since many dogs ride quietly in a crate, particularly if you cover the crate so they cannot see people or dogs outside. The crate can provide a familiar safe place if you stay overnight in a hotel. (Mesh crates are useful for travel since they fold up well and are lightweight but they do not provide your dog much protection in the car in the event of an accident.)

Crates are sometimes used to control destructive behaviors from dogs with noise phobias and separation distress. While some dogs with these problems are calmer in crates, it is important to know that crating is NOT a treatment for these anxiety disorders. More often than not, crating accentuates the dog's anxiety and crated dogs can panic so severely that they injure themselves trying to break free of the crate. If your dog has one of these disorders, immediately seek help from your veterinarian.

Which crate to choose?

There are three basic types of crates: wire crates, plastic crates, and mesh crates. Mesh crates are popular with people that travel, but may be less suitable for puppy training at home. Which crate is best will depend on your dog. Some dogs feel more comfortable in the darker, den-like feel of the airline crate, whereas other dogs will prefer the openness of the wire crate. You may need to try each type to discover which your dog or puppy prefers.



Wire crate



Plastic (airline) crate



Mesh crate

Whichever type you choose, the crate should be large enough that the dog or puppy can stand up fully, turn around, and lie down completely on its side. To aid with house training, you may need to start with a smaller crate and then get a larger size as your puppy grows. Alternatively, block off the back part of a larger crate and then remove this barricade as the puppy gets bigger.

How long is too long?

There is no definitive standard on what is too long to crate your dog at one time or the total number of hours per day. Standard house training guidelines for puppies suggest that puppies be crated for no longer than one hour per month of age plus one. This means that a three-month-old puppy should not be crated for more than four hours during the day without having an elimination break.

For adult dogs crating durations for six hours or less may be ideal in terms of welfare. While many adult dogs seem to handle crating for eight or more hours, crating over six hours without a break is likely to have a negative impact on your dog's health and welfare. For owners that work all day, having a friend or dog walker come in the middle of the day is ideal.

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How do I introduce my dog or puppy to a crate?

Slowly! If you acquired your puppy from a breeder or foster home, hopefully they introduced your puppy to a crate already. If the puppy is new to a crate, often the best initial arrangement is to place the crate inside the pen with the door open and potty pads on the floor. This allows the puppy to slowly start exploring the crate without having to be locked into it immediately. The pen prevents the puppy from getting into trouble and also limits where the puppy may eliminate if it does so. Place a bed inside the crate and periodically leave toys and treats inside the crate to encourage the puppy to go inside.

Do not close the door at first. Let the puppy explore in and out at will. When the puppy is freely going into the crate, and perhaps resting in there voluntarily, then you can begin to close the crate door for very short periods of time. Ideally when you first start closing the door, give the puppy its meal or some other enrichment toy such as a stuffed food toy while it is closed in the crate. This helps the puppy learn the extra good things happen when the crate door is closed. Over time, gradually keep the crate door closed for longer periods. Initially when you close the crate door, you should stay in sight so the puppy can see you. When your puppy is comfortable resting in the crate with the door closed for several minutes, you can begin to briefly step out of sight.

Lightly spraying scents, such as lavender or chamomile in the crate may help the puppy remain calm. Pheromone products are particularly helpful when acclimating puppies to a new home and/or a crate (authors use Adaptil®). A stuffed dog with a heartbeat and a heat source (see for example <http://www.snugglepetproducts.com>) can be placed in the crate as well.

You can use similar techniques to train an adult dog to use a crate. How long it will take to acclimate your dog or puppy to a crate will depend on the individual animal and how methodically you implement the gradual confinement. If you have difficulty with the training process, or your pet shows significant distress in the crate even with a few seconds or minutes of confinement, you should seek professional assistance immediately from your veterinarian and behavior consultant.

