

Crate Training: The Benefits for You and Your Dog

By Sherry Woodard

Why should I use a crate?

Dogs are hard-wired by their genetic history to be den animals. A den is a small, safe, well-defined space. It is a place in which dogs feel instinctively safe. It is also a place that they instinctively avoid soiling. The combination of these two native traits are what make crate training, done in the right way, a kind and effective component in house-training your new puppy or dog.

A crate can also be a place for your dog to rest or have “down time.” If you have just acquired a dog, a crate can limit access to the entire house until your new dog knows the house rules. A crate can help with house-training by setting up a routine. For example, you can feed the puppy in the crate and, afterwards, carry him or walk him on a lead straight out to an elimination site where you can use a word or phrase to remind the dog what the trip outside is for.



There are other benefits of crate training. At some point in your dog's life, it may be necessary to use a crate when you are traveling with your pet or when your dog is recuperating from an injury. Such potentially traumatic situations will be much less stressful if your dog is already familiar with and comfortable in a crate.

Where do I purchase a crate and how do I know which one to buy?

Most pet-supply stores carry dog crates; pet catalogs sell them as well. Considerations when buying your crate: Make sure the crate is big enough so that the dog can stand up, turn around and lay flat on his side in comfort, but small enough that there isn't enough room for the dog to sleep and eat at one end and eliminate at the other. If you are training a growing puppy, you can buy a larger crate with a divider for adjusting the crate as he grows.

How do I introduce the crate?

You can prevent problems with crate training by setting your dog up for success. Your dog should only associate good things with the crate, so start by putting treats and/or toys in the crate and encouraging him to go in. Some dogs may need to warm up to the crate slowly. If your dog is afraid to go in, place a treat in the crate as far as he is willing to go. After he takes the treat, place another treat a little further back in the crate. Keep going until he is eating treats at the very back, then feed him his next meal in the crate with the door open, so that he can walk in and out at will. Crate training a fearful dog can take days, so be patient and encouraging. If a crate is properly introduced and used, your dog will happily enter and settle down.

Should the crate be used at night?

Sure, you can use the crate at night. Put the dog in with a treat and a command like “kennel” or “kennel up” delivered in a cheery tone of voice. The crate should be situated close to you so that you can hear the dog whine or whimper if he needs to eliminate during the night. (Dogs will usually make some kind of noise rather than make a mess where they sleep.)

If you are training a puppy, be prepared for one or two trips outside at night to eliminate. If the puppy goes outside and doesn’t produce, do not allow any extra time for play or long drinks of water when you come back inside. Instead, encourage the pup to return to the crate. He may whine a bit, but if you have given him ample opportunity to eliminate, try to ignore the protest and the puppy should settle down quickly.

How much time in the crate is okay?

No dog, young or old, should be living in a crate full-time. Dogs are pack animals, so for a dog to have a good quality of life, social isolation should be kept to a minimum. All dogs need daily exercise and some interaction with others. Even four hours in a crate without a break during the day is a long time for many adult dogs, so we don’t recommend that you crate your dog if you’re gone all day. Except for nighttime, crating a dog for long periods of time is not acceptable.

Puppies, especially, should not be left in a crate for long periods of time (more than two hours). It is important that puppies not be neglected and forced to break their instinctive aversion to soiling their sleeping area. Unfortunately, this is what happens to many pet-store puppies and it can lead to serious house-training difficulties. Also, since they are still developing, puppies have even more need for social interaction than adult dogs. If they aren’t socialized to the world while they are young, they can develop fears and aberrant behaviors of many kinds.

Most adult dogs can stay in a crate for the entire night without a trip outside. However, young puppies and some old dogs cannot physically hold their bladders and bowels through the night.

When should a crate not be used?

A crate should not be used as a form of punishment. As mentioned earlier, your dog should have only warm, fuzzy feelings about her crate. Even though a dog can come to see her crate as a safe place, it is not the solution for a dog with separation anxiety, since she could injure herself trying to get out.

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See also: Separation Anxiety
House-Training Your Dog