

Crate Training Your Dog

A crate can be an extremely useful training tool for housetraining puppies, retraining adult dogs, and preventing destructive behavior from young dogs. While it is true that species of wild dogs and wolves are raised in dens, as adults they don't spend much time there. Thus, although dogs have been called "denning" animals, this doesn't mean that your dog will automatically accept a crate or that he should spend most of his days crated once he is trained.

A crate isn't always necessary to restrict your dog's activities. A safe room that has been "doggie proofed" such as a laundry room, bathroom or kitchen can be used to confine your dog when you cannot supervise him or need to leave him alone.

If you want to use a crate for training purposes, and when traveling, you must first help your dog learn to be relaxed and calm when in a crate, and when left alone in one. When dogs are introduced to crates gradually, many enjoy resting there, if they can come and go at will.

Choosing and Preparing A Crate

You have a variety of crates to choose from. Wire crates and exercise pens allow air flow and a view. Plastic and nylon crates provide protection and privacy. Regardless of the type of crate or area you choose, your dog must be able to stand up, lie down, stretch out and turn around comfortably. Contrary to what you may have read, you should be more concerned about purchasing a crate that is large enough for your dog to be comfortable, rather than selecting one that barely provides room to lie down.

Put a blanket, pillow or pad inside the crate for comfort. If your dog is still in the normal puppy chewing phase, use a flexible rubber mat that is less easily chewed than a blanket or pillow.

Water should always be available. A special treat or toy such as a toy stuffed with food or a chewie bone should be provided for chewing entertainment and to make the area or crate a place to enjoy something special. A chew toy will also relax your dog.

Accustoming Your Dog to the Crate

Place the crate in a room where you spend considerable time, such as a den or family room. Initially, leave the door to the crate open and let your dog freely go in and out. Entice your dog to enter the crate by tossing toys and treats inside. Praise your dog for going into the crate.

You can also place your dog's food in the crate and allow him to eat several meals there, with the door open, to convince him it is nothing to be afraid of. When your dog is comfortable going in and out of the crate freely, remain by the crate and shut the door briefly. After a few seconds, open the door and release your dog. Place a favorite chew toy in the crate before shutting the door.

Accustom your dog to
his crate gradually.

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

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Do not crate your
dog if he has
separation anxiety
or a fear or phobia.

Don't make coming out of the crate a "big deal" as this will teach your dog that being out of the crate is more rewarding than being in it. Repeat these brief periods of confinement a number of times, gradually increasing their duration until your dog is relaxed in the crate for about 10 minutes with you in sight, nearby.

Next, place your dog in the crate, leave the room for a few seconds, return, leave again, return and release your dog from the crate. Gradually increase the time you are out of sight, until your dog can stay in the crate for about 30 minutes while you are home, but out of sight.

You can also accustom your dog to sleeping in her crate overnight, preferably in your bedroom. Do not use this option if your dog is distressed, especially if she is crated where she can't see you.

The next step is to accustom your dog to being left alone in her crate. Start by leaving your dog crated for a brief errand such as leaving to get the mail or pick up a few groceries. Gradually, over five to 10 absences, work up to leaving your dog crated for about an hour. To be certain your dog is calm and relaxed and not distressed while crated, videotape or audiotape her or simply stand by a window to listen for signs of distress. Ultimately you'll want to know how she is doing when you are not on the property.

If at any time during this training your dog shows any signs of distress such as barking, whining, drooling, relieving herself in or trying to escape the crate, stop immediately and go back to an earlier stage in your training. You may have tried to progress too quickly, or your dog may be showing signs of separation anxiety or fear of confinement. Try repeating some of your training steps. If your dog is still distressed, this is a good sign you need a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or trainer to help you.

Once your dog is crate trained, continue to crate your dog from time to time when you are home, to compensate for the inevitable association between being crated and being left alone.

What Not To Do

Your dog should never be crated longer than he can hold his bladder and bowels. For young puppies this may be no more than an hour or two. Provide your crated dog with plenty of opportunities for exercise, play and time with you when he is not crated. Young dogs especially need play and social time.

Never force your dog to go into the crate. If your dog is reluctant to go into the crate, this is a clear sign something is amiss.

If your dog is soiling in his crate, getting a smaller crate is NEVER the answer. When dogs soil their crate it either means they are anxious or fearful, have been crated for longer than they can control themselves or are ill. This is a clear animal welfare problem. Talk first with your veterinarian to determine if your dog is ill, and then consult a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other competent behavior consultant. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

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If at any time your dog shows signs of fear or panic in his crate, remove him and start over with crate training.

If you are considering using a crate because of problems when your dog is left home alone, DO NOT do so until you know whether or not these problems are due to some fear or separation anxiety. Dogs with fears such as fears of thunderstorms or separation anxiety panic when they are alone and will usually harm themselves trying to escape from close confinement. Speak with your veterinarian about medication (medication alone is not a solution for separation anxiety) that may help with the behavior modification to reduce your dog's fears or separation anxiety.

Helping Your Dog Make The Transition To Less Confinement And More Freedom In The House

It's very hard to give a general "rule of thumb" as to when a dog is ready for more freedom. Certainly, he must be well housetrained, and not routinely chewing on off-limit items when you are home. Some dogs remain destructive when alone until they are 2 years of age, others can be trusted at a year or less.

Start with very brief absences with your dog free in the house. Be sure to "dog-proof" the house before you leave - don't leave any particularly enticing items within easy reach. Another option is to close doors or set up baby gates to restrict your dog's access to certain parts of the house. If your 5 minute absence results in any misbehavior, try a briefer absence. If, after several attempts, you are consistently coming home to "messes", perhaps your dog is not yet mature enough to be left alone loose in the house.

However, if your brief absences are successful, gradually lengthen them. Avoid pushing your luck - don't jump from your dog being well behaved for an hour to attempting to leave him free for an 8 hour work day! Continue working up to longer absences on a gradual basis.

It's very important that you keep working on helping your dog make this transition. Spending 8 to 10 hours a day in a crate 5 days a week (and overnight as well) is not a good quality of life for a dog. Dogs need some control over their environment, and need to be able to move around and respond to their environment. If you are crating your dog because of problems if he is loose in the house when alone, address these issues rather than continuing to crate your dog indefinitely.

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