

CRATE TRAINING YOUR DOG

What Is Crating?

A crate is a portable "kennel" that is just large enough to contain the dog it is intended for, made of either metal or plastic. "Crating" is the practice of using this kennel for training purposes, usually in housetraining and houseproofing a dog. Crating is a controversial topic. There are those who believe that crate training is indefensible and others who believe that it is a panacea. The reality is likely somewhere in between.

What does the dog think?

First, you must understand what the crate represents to the dog. Dogs are by nature den creatures -- and the crate, properly introduced, is its den. It is a safe haven where it does not need to worry about defending territory. It is its own private bedroom which it absolutely will not soil if it can help it. Judicious use of the crate can alleviate a number of problems, stop others from ever developing, and aid substantially in housetraining.

Where is the crate? It should be around other people. Ideally, set it up in the bedroom near you. Have the dog sleep in it at night. Dogs are social and like to be around their people. Don't force it into the crate. Feed your dog in the crate.

Can they be abused?

Certainly. Anything intended for a dog can be abused. That doesn't make it wrong; it does mean you need to know what you are doing. Things to remember:

- The crate must be large enough for the dog to stand and turn around.
- A puppy should not be left in for more than 3 or 4 hours at a time.
- An adult dog should not spend more than about 8 hours a day in one.
- No dog should be forced to remain in a soiled crate. You must rearrange time spent in the crate to avoid this happening in the first place.
- Not all dogs require constant crating; most can be slowly weaned off once they get older and you can trust them more in the house,
- Properly introduce dogs, especially older dogs, to the crate. Most dogs like their crates, but not all do so immediately.
- Even when you are no longer using the crate regularly, leave it available for napping. A crate trained dog is always more easily handled: in the car, at the vets, when traveling, etc.

Proper use of a crate

Crating a puppy or dog often seems unappealing to humans, but it is not cruel to the dog. A dog's crate is similar to a child's playpen, except it has a roof (dogs can jump out of a playpen) and is chewproof. Also, a crate is not suitable for activity or exercise, but rather for rest. Dogs are carnivores and do not need to be constantly active during the daytime, like people do.

If a crate is properly introduced to a dog (or puppy) the dog will grow to think of the crate as its den and safe haven. Most dogs that are crated will use the open crate as a resting place.

The major use of a crate is to prevent the dog from doing something wrong and not getting corrected for it. It is useless to correct a dog for something that it has already done; the dog must be "caught in the act". If the dog is out of its crate while unsupervised, it may do something wrong and not be corrected, or worse yet, corrected after the fact. If the dog is not corrected, the dog may develop the problem behavior as a habit (dogs are creatures of habit), or learn that it can get away with the behavior when not immediately supervised. A dog that rarely gets away with anything will not learn that if nobody is around it can get away with bad behaviors.

If the dog is corrected after the fact, it will not associate the correction with the behavior, and will begin to think that corrections are arbitrary, and that the owner is not to be trusted. This results in a poor relationship and a dog that does not associate corrections, which are believed arbitrary, with bad behaviors even when they are applied in time. This cannot be overemphasized: a dog's lack of trust in its owner's corrections is one of the major sources of problems between dogs and their owners.

A secondary advantage of a crate is that it minimizes damage done by a dog (especially a young one) to the house, furniture, footwear etc. This reduces costs and aggravation and makes it easier for the dog and master to get along. It also protects the dog from harm by its destruction: ingestion of splinters or toy parts, shock from chewing through wires, etc.

A young dog should be placed in its crate whenever it cannot be supervised.

If a dog is trained in puppyhood with a crate, it will not always require crating. Puppies or untrained dogs require extensive crating. After a year or so of crate training, many dogs will know what to do and what not to, and will have good habits. At this time crating might only be used when the dog needs to be out of the way, or when traveling.

Crating do's and don'ts

- Do think of the crate as a good thing. In time, your dog will too.
 - Do let the dog out often enough so that it is never forced to soil the crate.
 - Do let the dog out if it whines because it needs to eliminate. If you know it doesn't have to eliminate, correct it for whining or barking.
 - Do clean out the crate regularly.
 - Don't punish the dog if it soils the crate. It is miserable enough and probably had to.
 - Don't use the crate as a punishment.
 - Don't leave the dog in the crate for a long time after letting it eat and drink a lot. (because the dog will be uncomfortable and may have to eliminate in the crate.)
 - Don't leave the dog in the crate too much. Dogs sleep and rest a lot, but not all the time. They need play time and exercise. When you are at home, they should not be in the crate (except at night when they are still very young puppies). If necessary, put a leash on your pup and tie it around your waist while you're at home.
 - Don't check to see if your dog is trustworthy in the house (unsupervised, outside of the crate) by letting the dog out of the crate for a long time. Start with very short periods and work your way up to longer periods.
 - Don't ever let the dog grow unaccustomed to the crate. An occasional stint even for the best behaved dog will make traveling and special situations that require crating easier.
 - Don't put pillows or blankets in the crate without a good reason. Most dogs like it cooler than their human companions and prefer to stretch out on a hard, cool surface. Besides providing a place to urinate on, some dogs will simply destroy them. A rubber mat or a piece of peg-board cut to the right size might be a good compromise (be sure to clean under any floor covering frequently).
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Decreasing Crate Time

Remember, your ultimate goal in using the crate is to produce an easily housetrained dog and one that can be trusted in the house. You are always working toward the time when you do not need to use a crate extensively. With housetraining, it is only a matter of time for the pup to outgrow the need for a crate. As a puppy gets older, it will naturally develop ways of telling you that it needs to go (but probably not before about 4-6 months, be patient), especially if you encourage this. As this starts to develop, you can decrease the crate usage. Always keep a close eye on your pup -- the trouble you take now will pay big dividends later. If you need to, put a leash on your pup and attach it to your waist. That keeps the pup from wandering off into trouble. By the time your puppy is about 6-8 months, he should be able to sleep through the night either in an open crate or a dog bed. Many breeds, especially the larger and more active ones, will need to be crated during their adolescence until they can be trusted in the home, if you cannot leave them outside in the yard while you are gone. There are several things you need to keep in mind. The first is that this type of crating is never to be a permanent arrangement except for those rare cases where the dog proves completely unreliable. While this does happen, it's more common for the dog to be sufficiently mature by the time they are two or so to be left alone in the house. To make the transition between keeping your dog in the crate and leaving him out when you are at work, start preparing your dog on weekends. Leave him in your house for an hour and then come back. Maybe it needs to be fifteen minutes. Whatever. Find the time that works, and make a habit of leaving him unsupervised in the house for that long. Be sure to praise him when you come back. (Leave the crate open -- available but open -- while you are gone.) When you know the dog is reliable for this period of time, gradually add 15-30 minute increments to the dog's "safe time." Don't be surprised if this takes months or even a year. Now, there are some dogs that are never reliable when left inside. This might include dogs that were rescued, dogs that have separation anxiety, dogs that destroy things indiscriminately, or who mark or otherwise eliminate in the house.

Does everyone use a crate?

Of course not. There are many who think they are cruel and will not use them. People in Europe tend not to use them. People who have not heard of using them won't generally use them. If you have an outside yard with a fence or a secure kennel you may not need to use them. They are extremely useful. But they are not the only means to achieve housetraining or safety in the house or car. They are, in the opinion of many, one of the best and easiest ways of doing so, with many side benefits.