

CRATE TRAINING – A SAFE HAVEN FOR YOUR DOG

Why might my dog need to be confined?

Dogs are highly social animals that make wonderful pets. They can be effective as watchdogs, are excellent companions for play and exercise, and are sources of affection and comfort. However, with the lifestyle and schedule of the majority of families, dogs must learn to spend a portion of the day at home, while their human family is away at school, work, shopping or engaging in recreational activities. During those times when you are away and unavailable to supervise, the pet may still feel the need to chew, play, explore, eat, or eliminate. These behaviors can be very distressing and damaging to the home. Confining your dog to a play area with its toys is akin to putting a young child in its playpen; while teaching your dog to relax and sleep in its crate or bed would be similar to putting your baby in its crib when its time for bedtime or a nap.

How can this misbehavior be prevented?

Preventing inappropriate behaviors when you are absent involves both scheduling and prevention. Scheduling means insuring that the pet has had the opportunity to play, eat, and eliminate before you leave it in its confinement area or crate. By maintaining a regular daily routine and timing your departures (or other daily commitments) at a time when your dog would normally be napping or playing with its own toys, there should be minimal resistance to confinement. Prevention involves keeping the pet in a confined area where it is secure, safe, and can do no damage to itself or your possessions.

What are my options for confinement?

Depending on the structure of your home, it may be possible to confine your dog to a limited portion of your home, by closing a few doors, or putting up some child gates or barricades. The dog can then be allowed access to the remaining areas of the house. Another option is to use avoidance devices that keep the pet away from selected areas (see our handout on 'Behavior management products'). If dog-proofing is not possible when you have to leave your dog unsupervised, you might need to confine your dog to a single room, pen, or crate. This smaller confinement area not only provides safety for the dog and protection of the home from damage, but also provides a means of teaching the dog what it is supposed to chew, and where it is supposed to eliminate i.e. setting up for success rather than attempting to punish what might be undesirable, but normal play, exploration, scavenging or elimination.

Isn't crate training cruel?

Crate training is neither cruel nor unfair. On the contrary, leaving the dog unsupervised to wander, investigate, destroy, and perhaps injure itself is far more inhumane than confinement. Insure that the crate is large enough for your dog to stand, turn and play with its toys. Proper timing and scheduling can help your dog to adapt. Be certain that your dog has had sufficient play, exercise, attention, and an opportunity to eliminate before confinement, and that you return before the dog next needs to eliminate. Ideally the pet should be placed in its crate at times of the day when it is due for a nap, or when it normally amuses itself by playing with its own toys. Although confinement should be used when you cannot supervise your dog, when you are at home you must try to keep the pet with you (except during the pet's nap times), as this is the only way to train and reinforce desirable behavior and direct the pet away from undesirable behavior. Be sure not to require your pet to be confined longer than wait to eliminate.

What are the benefits of crate training?

Confinement training has many benefits. It keeps your pet safe and prevents damage to household possessions. The crate also provides a place of security; a comfortable retreat where the dog can relax, sleep, or chew on a favorite toy. Confining the pet to a crate or room, when the owner is not available to supervise can immediately prevent behavior problems. If the puppy is crated when it is napping or playing with its own toys, the risk for over-attachment and separation anxiety might be reduced. While in the crate the puppy learns to spend time away from the owners napping or engaging in play behavior. When you are at home, supervision and rewards can be used to prevent undesirable behavior, and to teach the dog where to eliminate, what to chew, and what rooms and areas are “out of bounds.”

Will cage confinement help with house-training?

Crate training is one of the quickest and most effective ways to house-train a dog. Since most dogs instinctively avoid eliminating in their sleeping and eating areas, dogs that use their crate as a bed or “den” will seldom eliminate inside unless they have been left in the crate for too long or they are excessively anxious when confined. Crate training can also help teach the dog to develop control over its elimination. As soon as your dog is released from its crate, take it to the designated area and reward elimination at acceptable locations. Since the crate prevents chewing, digging, and elimination on the owner’s home and property, owners of crate trained puppies have fewer behavior concerns, the puppy receives far less discipline and punishment, and the overall relationship between pet and owner can be dramatically improved. For further details see our Puppy – Housetraining Guide.

Will the crate provoke barking?

The crate can also be a useful way to reduce or eliminate distress barking. Rather than locking the puppy up and away from the owners at nighttime or during mealtime, the puppy can be housed in its crate in the bedroom or kitchen. In this way the puppy cannot get into mischief, and is less likely to cry out or vocalize, with the owners in the room. Of course if the puppy is not napping and you are available to supervise your puppy should be out and about with you watching closely to insure that it comes to no harm and does not get into mischief. Distress vocalization is far more likely for owners that lock their puppy out of harms way in a laundry or basement with no access to them. When and if the owner then goes to the puppy to quiet it down or check it out, the crying behavior is rewarded.

Are there other benefits to caging?

Throughout its life, whether traveling or boarding, your dog may require crate confinement for varying periods of time. Dogs that are comfortable with crating are more likely to feel secure, and far less stressed, should caging be required. By bringing along the dog’s bedding or its own crate for boarding or veterinary visits, the pet may feel even more settled and relaxed.

PUPPY CRATE TRAINING

What type of crate or confinement area works best?

A metal, collapsible crate with a tray floor works well, as long as the crate is large enough for the dog to stand, turn, and stretch out. Some dogs feel more secure if a blanket is draped over the crate. A plastic traveling crate or a homemade crate can also

be used. Playpens or barricades may also be successful as long as they are indestructible and escape proof.

Where should the cage be located?

Because dogs are social animals, an ideal location for the crate is a room where the family spends time such as a kitchen, den, or in a bedroom where the dog might sleep at night.

How can crating or confinement become a positive experience?

Most dogs quickly choose a small area, such as a corner of a room, in a dog bed, or on or under a couch, where they go to relax. If your puppy has just recently been adopted from the breeder, kennel or pet store, crate training should be relatively easy, since your puppy is likely already accustomed to sleeping in a pen or crate. The key to making the crate the dog's favorite retreat and sleeping area, is to associate the crate with as many positive and relaxing experiences and stimuli as possible (treats, chew toys, bedding) and to place the dog in its cage when playing with new toys, during scheduled rest and sleep periods or even as a feeding area. You must therefore plan and be aware of the dog's schedule, including its needs for exploration, play, food, and elimination, so that the dog is only placed in its cage, when each of these needs is fulfilled. You must then return to the dog to release it from its cage before the next exercise, feeding or elimination period is due. A radio or television playing in the background may help to calm the dog when it is alone in its cage, especially during the daytime. These may also help to mask environmental noises that can stimulate the dog to vocalize. The crate should not be used for punishment.

How do I crate-train my new puppy?

Introduce the puppy to the crate as soon as it is brought home and as early in the day as possible. Place a variety of treats in the cage throughout the day so that the puppy is encouraged to enter voluntarily. Bedding, toys and water can also be offered to the puppy in the open cage. Food might also be placed in the pen or crate if you wish to also designate it as a feeding area.

Choose a location outdoors for the puppy to eliminate. Take the puppy to the location, wait until the puppy eliminates, and reward the puppy lavishly with praise or food. After some additional play and exercise, and when you feel its time for your puppy to take a nap (or when you see your puppy begin to settle down for nap), place the puppy in its crate with water, a toy and a treat and close the door.

If the puppy is tired and calm, it may take a "nap" shortly after being placed in its crate. If not, be certain to provide a few novel and stimulating toys or chews for play. In this way the crate serves one of two functions – as your puppy's bed (crib) or your puppy's play area (playpen).

Leave the room but remain close enough to hear the puppy. Escape behavior and vocalization are to be expected when a dog is first placed into its crate. If the "complaints" are short or mild, ignore your puppy until the crying stops. Never release the puppy unless it is quiet. This teaches that quiet behavior, and not crying will be rewarded. Release the puppy after a few minutes of quiet or a short nap.

A brief disruption may be useful to deter crying if it does not subside on its own. A shaker can (a sealed can filled with coins or marbles) can be tossed at the crate when the pup barks. Other methods include water sprayers or alarms (audible or ultrasonic). The owner should remain out of sight. By plugging in an alarm, tape recorder, or hair dryer beside the crate and turning it on with a remote control switch each time the dog barks, the dog can be taught that barking has unpleasant consequences whether the owner is present or not. When the barking ceases, the disruption is stopped. Bark collars and alarms that are activated by the barking are also available for persistent problems. These techniques must be used with caution, since it can exacerbate the vocalization problem of a very anxious pet.

Repeat the cage and release procedure a few more times during the day at each naptime and each time your puppy is given a toy or chew with which to play. Each time, increase the time that the dog must stay in the crate before letting it out. Always give the puppy exercise and a chance to eliminate before securing it in the crate.

At bedtime, the dog should be exercised, secured in its crate, and left for the night. Do not go to the dog if it cries. Remote punishment can be used to deter crying. The crate might remain in the same place as it has been during the day, or might be moved (or a second crate used) to the bedroom.

If the pup sleeps in one end of its crate and eliminates in the other, a divider can be installed to keep the puppy in a smaller area providing the puppy is not required to spend more time in the crate than it is capable of holding its urine or stool. If the puppy must eliminate, it does not matter how small the area is; the puppy will have to eliminate.

Never leave the puppy in its crate for longer than it can control itself or it may be forced to eliminate in the crate.

If the pup must be left for long periods during which it might eliminate, it should be confined to a larger area such as a dog-proof room or pen, with paper left down for elimination. As the puppy gets older, its control increases and it can be left longer in its crate.

Although there is a great deal of individual variability, many puppies can control themselves through the night by 3 months of age. During the daytime, once the puppy has relieved itself, a 2-month old puppy may have up to 3 hours control, a 3-month puppy up to 4 hours, and a 4 month old puppy up to 5 hours.

A crate is not an excuse to ignore the dog!

CRATE TRAINING ADULT DOGS

What is the best technique for crate training older pets and adult dogs?

For adult dogs or older puppies that have not been crate trained previously, set up the crate in the dog's feeding area with the door open for a few days. Place food, treats, and water in the crate so that the dog enters the crate on its own. Another alternative is to place the crate (or a second crate) in the dog's sleeping area with its bedding. Once the dog is entering the crate freely, it is time to close the door for very short periods of time. Some dogs might do better if a pen, or confinement area with barricade (child gate).

Using the same training techniques as for 'sit' and 'stay' training, have the dog enter its crate for short periods of time to obtain food, treats, or chew toys. Once the pet expects treats each time it enters the crate, train the dog to enter the crate on command (e.g. kennel!), and have the dog remain in the kennel for progressively longer periods of time, before the dog is allowed to exit. Give small rewards each time the dog enters the cage at first, and give the dog a favored chew toy or some food to help make the stay more enjoyable. At first, the door can remain open during these training sessions.

When the dog is capable of staying comfortably and quietly in the crate begin to lock the dog in the crate at nighttime. Once the dog sleeps in the crate through the night, try leaving the pet in the crate during the daytime. Try short departures first, and gradually make them longer.

Is crate training practical for all dogs?

An occasional dog may not tolerate crate training, and may continue to show anxiety, or even eliminate when confined. These dogs may adapt better to other types of confinement such as a pen, dog run, small room, or barricaded area. Of course, if the dog is being left alone for longer than it can control (hold in) its elimination, it will be necessary to provide an area much larger than a cage, so that the pet has a location on which to eliminate, away from its food and bedding.

Continued anxiety, destruction or vocalization when placed in the crate may indicate separation anxiety. The intervention of a behaviorist may be needed.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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