

Crate Training:

One Approach to House-training and the Prevention of Destructive Behaviors

YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?! PUT MY DOG IN A CAGE? HOW CRUEL!

Cruel? NO. Done properly, crate training can be the answer to many problems faced by dogs and their owners. Dogs have a natural denning instinct that they inherited from their ancestor, the wolf. Wolves find a small cave (or dig themselves one) where they sleep, rest, and just “hang out.” It is home. Providing your dog with a crate satisfies his desire to den. No one is going to yell at him for doing something wrong while he is in his crate. No one is going to step on his tail, trip over him, or pull on his ears. It is easier to teach small children to stay away from the dog while he is in his crate than to yell, “LEAVE THE DOG ALONE!” every few minutes.

WHAT IS A CRATE?

A crate is an indoor doghouse with a door. It is big enough for your dog to easily stand up, turn around, and lie down in. This “indoor doghouse” is placed in a much-used area of your house (such as the living room or kitchen) during the day. At night, the crate should be moved to an unoccupied corner of a bedroom. It can be made of plastic, wire, wood, or a combination of all three. It is a place for your dog to relax in when no one is around to make sure Rover is staying out of trouble. It is your dog’s space in your house. It is his bed (or room) and sanctuary; it is his.



WHY CRATE TRAIN?

Many people crate train their dog for the simple reason that the dog can do no wrong while he is in his crate. Your dog can’t piddle on the rug, harass the mailman, chew on the furniture, get into the trash, or eat your children’s hamster. He learns to relax and go to sleep while you are away. In effect, it’s teaching him good habits, to SLEEP while his family is away. And while he sleeps, you can go shopping, visit friends, run errands, take in a movie, and not have to worry about what kind of shape the house is going to be in when you get home. You put your dog in his crate, shut the door and leave for a few hours, and know that when you return, it will be a happy reunion and not a one-sided yelling match with your dog cringing in the corner.

BUT WHAT ABOUT EXERCISE? I THOUGHT A DOG NEEDED FREEDOM TO RUN AROUND. WON’T MY DOG BE CRAMPED IN SUCH SMALL QUARTERS?!

NO. Before putting your dog in his crate each day before you go to work (or go off for a couple of hours to run errands), you will have made sure he has had a good exercise session with you. Remember, you won’t be

- putting your dog there forever. Four or five hours while you go shopping, or overnight so you can sleep without having to worry about what your dog is doing is fine.



He will not have to spend every day of life in his crate anyway. It’s just until he outgrows that puppy destructive stage, or until you teach him your household rules, or until he adjusts to living with you (especially if you have adopted a shelter dog). Your dog will actually enjoy being in a crate after you have taught him that it is his “room.”

For longer periods of time (generally anything over eight hours during the day), your adult dog should be confined to a larger area such as a completely enclosed dog run alongside your house, so he has the choice to eliminate if needed. Ideally if you need to crate your dog during your workday (five or more hours), then either come home at lunch to let your dog out for a stretch and elimination, hire a dog walker or pet sitter to come during the day, OR provide a secure area large enough for your dog to eliminate in and yet sleep or play in the other (i.e. a closed off kitchen area, outside enclosed dog run, or a very secure backyard area). Again, always make sure your puppy or dog has had a good exercise session with you before confining him for the day. See our Play and Exercise handout.

THEN WHY CRATE TRAIN AT ALL? WHY CAN'T I JUST LEAVE MY DOG IN THE YARD ALL THE TIME?

Because dogs by nature are pack animals, they are very social. They prefer the company of others (probably more so than humans do). They need to be in the house, even when you are not there or when you are sleeping and can't be interacting with them. They need to feel that they are part of your family "pack" and that means being in the house (the pack's den), even though you may not be in the house. Depriving your dog of that feeling of "belonging" and of being a part of your family pack can do as much psychological damage as locking a child in the closet for most of the day. They become neurotic or psychotic.

Behavior problems such as digging, barking, chewing, and escaping WILL develop in a dog kept primarily outdoors. Crate training prevents destructive behaviors when you are not home or can't supervise the dog directly when indoors. As a family companion and friend, your dog should be in the house with you; allow him to belong.

BUT WON'T HE GET TERRIBLY BORED, BEING LOCKED UP?!!

NO. He will learn to just sleep while you are away. That's a lot better than leaving him out where he learns it is fun to chew on the door, get into the garbage, or piddle on the rug. (These are all normal behaviors that ANY dog will exhibit until he is taught how to live WITH people.) A dog will sleep 18 hours a day if you let him. And remember, a dog's version of recreation while you are away often involves destroying your house or your yard.

Also, it is not as if he must remain in his crate for the rest of his life; it is just until he gets over the destructive period all dogs go through when they are young. (Or if it's an older dog in a new home, just until you, the owner, feel safe leaving him alone in your house unconfined.)

Many dogs form habits, such as house soiling, that can be easily changed by crate training. If a dog has formed the habit of urinating or defecating in the house wherever and whenever he feels like it, then crate training can teach your dog to hold it until you provide him the opportunity to go out and to relieve himself. A normal, healthy dog will try very hard not to urinate or defecate in his crate. To do so would mean he would have to lay in it. Most dogs prefer to wait until you can return to let them out.

HOW MANY MONTHS/YEARS SHOULD I USE A CRATE IN MY DOG'S LIFETIME?

It is highly recommended that any newly adopted adult dog be crate trained until he understands your household rules and has proven to be trustworthy when left alone for short time periods. For most newly acquired adult dogs, plan on using the crate regularly (whenever you are not home or can't directly supervise the dog) until the dog reaches at least one to two years of age, or for a minimum of eight consecutive months if the dog is past this age. For puppies, plan on using the crate for a minimum of one to two years to assure the dog has matured and grown out of the adolescent/destructive phase that ALL dogs go through. The crate can be used for the rest of the dog's life as well; the door tied open so the dog has the choice to use it or not.

PERHAPS I'LL GIVE IT A TRY. WHERE CAN I GET A CRATE?

The Humane Society Silicon Valley's own pet store, Whole Pets, carries them or any of the larger pet stores such as An-Jan Feed, PETsMART or Petco.

WHAT KIND OF MONEY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

It depends on the size of your dog and where you purchase the crate. Just remember though, a crate is something your dog will have for the rest of his life. It is his bed, his room, and his space in your house. A good crate will last much longer than your dog will, so don't worry about it wearing out! Also, compare the initial cost of a crate with the cost of destructive behavior. Shelling out for a new crate is nothing compared to buying new carpet or a sofa, replacing stereo equipment, re-landscaping your yard, trying to find Rover after he has escaped from your yard, or explaining "hamster heaven" to your kids!

WHAT SIZE SHOULD I GET?

Your dog's crate should be big enough for him to easily stand up, turn around, and lie down in. If he piddles in one corner of the crate, then just make it smaller by adding cardboard boxes, bricks, or a wire barrier. As he gets the idea that the toilet is outdoors, then you can take the barriers out of crate and let him have a "king sized" room.

WHAT ABOUT PUPPIES — I DON'T WANT TO KEEP BUYING CRATES AS MY PUPPY GROWS BIGGER!

Right. You should estimate what size your puppy will be as an adult (breed books will be able to help you with this, providing you know what breed or mixture of breeds your puppy is) and buy a crate that will be big enough for him as an adult dog. Then you put cardboard boxes or a wire divider in one end to make the crate smaller. As your puppy grows, you gradually increase his "living space" in the crate by getting smaller boxes or moving the wire divider.

If you have an adult dog already, take him with you to the pet store to size him for the crate. Just stand your dog next to the crate (Don't scare him by shoving him in!) The top of the crate should extend three to four inches above his shoulders. The end of the crate should be about three to four inches from your dog's rump. If in doubt, buy larger, as you can always make the crate smaller with a wire divider or by piling boxes in the back of it.

WHAT'S THE BEST KIND OF CRATE TO BUY?

Metal crates have the advantage of folding up for storage, and metal crates allow for better air circulation. If you have a heavy coated dog, pick a crate with better air circulation as you can always cover the crate with a blanket if it is too cold. Remember though, that a dog will want his crate door left open, so he can go in and out as he pleases after he has outgrown the initial purpose of the crate. So the fact that metal crates can fold up when they are not in use may not be a good reason to purchase that kind of crate. Plastic crates can also be a good way to go: they can be easy to clean and do not squeak and rattle like metal does when the dog moves around inside. Some brand names of crates are: Midwest's iCrate, Vari-Kennel, Kennel Aire, Kennel Cab and Sky Kennel.

ONCE I HAVE THE CRATE, WHERE DO I PUT IT?

Your dog's crate should be placed in the most often used room in the house during the day. The living room, the family room, the kitchen, wherever your family spends the most time. At night, (especially if you have a puppy), the crate should be moved to a corner of an occupied bedroom. This helps the puppy sleep at night (being in the same room with his "person"), helps the pup bond to the family, and helps with house-training (you will know when the pup needs to go outside).

OK, SO NOW I HAVE A CRATE. HOW DO I TEACH MY DOG THAT THIS IS HIS ROOM?

At first, most dogs resent being confined because they feel you have left them and are not coming back. However, given some time to adjust, your dog will soon learn to love his crate and the security and privacy that goes along with it. Try feeding your dog his meals with the door tied open the first week or two and intermittently hiding special goodies in the crate. You want your dog to keep going back and checking out the crate in hopes he may find something good in it.

CRATE TRAINING THE EIGHT TO TWELVE WEEK-OLD PUPPY

Young puppies have very small bladders and cannot control them very well. They have to eliminate much more often than older puppies or adult dogs. To have a successful crate training program, follow the guidelines below.

Place a cardboard box or some other material in the crate to allow the puppy only enough room to lie down and turn around. An old blanket or towel can be placed in the remainder of the crate as the puppy's bed. **WARNING:** Do not give your puppy an expensive blanket or pet bed; all puppies are destructive! Give them something old, so if they chew it up, you won't be angry! The crate should be located in a bedroom, so if the pup wakes up in the middle of the night, you can take him outside quickly. Most puppies that have had access to their crates from the beginning have no complaints. The first time they are shut in, they may cry a little, but ignore them and soon they will give up and go to sleep. A three-month-old puppy can usually spend an entire night without having to relieve himself, as long as he did his business right before going to bed and he has not had any water at least two hours before bedtime.

The general rule of thumb is that during the day, a puppy can hold off elimination for as many hours as he is in months of age. For example, if you have a four-month-old puppy, then never make him spend more than two hours in the crate **DURING THE DAY** without a toilet break.

If you must leave your puppy unattended for longer time periods during the day, leave the crate door open so your puppy has access to his bed (crate) and a small area right outside the crate door allowing for a "bathroom spot" outside of his crate. The kitchen is a great choice as it will be easy to clean up any accidents. You may line his "bathroom area" with newspapers for easy cleanup, but you will **NOT** rely on this method for training. The papers are there for easy cleanup for you, **BUT** not to deliberately teach the puppy to go on them. Make sure the barricade is sturdy enough to prevent the puppy from climbing out and relieving himself in an inappropriate spot. This "bathroom spot" should not be a large area, usually two feet square is plenty of room. When you are home, the papers should be put away and you should be taking the puppy outdoors on regular intervals to the toilet.

Paper training your puppy is not recommended, as it confuses the pup. House-training should mean that the dog **NEVER** eliminates in the house. Paper training a pup is telling him it is OK to eliminate in the house, so we do **NOT** recommend using papers unless it is absolutely unavoidable. See the House-Training handout for more information on the correct way to house-train your puppy.

DO NOT LET YOUR PUPPY OUT WHEN HE IS CRYING RIGHT AFTER YOU HAVE SHUT THE DOOR.

(The exception to this rule is if you have forgotten to take him out to do his business first before locking him in.) If you let your puppy out while he is crying, you will have taught him that he can get his way by crying (emotional blackmail!). Always wait until your puppy is quiet before you let him out of his crate.

Another solution for over-vocalization while in the crate is to cover the crate with a lightweight sheet or towel. Many dogs will give up within minutes if they cannot see you.

The only other exception to this is when you first get up in the morning (or you have been gone longer than two hours) and your puppy is probably "loaded" and needs to go out immediately. Take him out right away. Also, if

you have been gone during the day for any length of time, you want to take your young puppy out immediately upon your arrival home. As your puppy physically matures and gains bladder and bowel control, you can expect him to “hold it” longer.

Do keep in mind that diet changes and medications can affect how long a dog can “hold it”. Digestive upsets can cause your dog to use the toilet much more often. Certain types of medications can increase water consumption, which, in future can cause a dog to eliminate much more often than normal. Always ask your veterinarian about the effects medications may have on your dog.

Your puppy’s crate should only contain an old towel, and a special chew item (such as a stuffed Kong toy or a stuffed sterilized beef bone). Do not leave food or water in the crate with your puppy. The crate should be located INDOORS so the pup is safe from the weather, scary noises, or teasing from neighbors.

You can teach your puppy to enter his crate upon cue. Read the section on crate training the adult dog to find out how.

CRATE TRAINING THE FIVE MONTH - OLD PUPPY AND ADULT DOGS

Although crate training the older puppy or adult dog is not as easy as a young puppy, it can still be done with less hassle than would be expected. Most dogs resent being confined at first, but soon learn to love and enjoy the security their crate provides.

Patience, persistence, some small yummy treats your dog enjoys, and a good set of earplugs are the only requirements to begin crate training. The first step is to let your dog investigate the crate with the door securely tied open. Throw his favorite toy or one of his treats just inside the lip of the crate and watch what happens. As soon as your dog goes in after the treat or toy, praise him enthusiastically with a happy tone of voice (do not try to shut the door at this point). Keep tossing the treats or toy into the crate so your dog has to go further in each time. Remember to praise him as your dog goes IN the crate. Ignore him once he steps out of the crate. Keep this up until your dog quickly and easily goes into the crate whenever you toss his toy or treat into the very back of the crate. Next, try putting his food dish in the crate so if he wants to eat, he has to go in. **DO NOT TRY TO CLOSE THE DOOR JUST YET.** At this point you are still trying to build confidence in your dog that this indoor doghouse is his and will not “eat” him. This procedure may take a few minutes to a week or more. Throughout the day, hide treats in the crate when your dog is not watching. You want to teach your dog to investigate the crate often during the day.

The next step is to repeat the above but each time your dog goes in his crate, say a cue word such as “GO TO BED,” “KENNEL,” “CRATE,” “ZONE OUT,” “CHILL OUT,” etc. in a happy tone of voice. It does not matter what words you say, the important point is you say the SAME words each time you play the crate game with him. For him to learn a verbal cue such as “KENNEL” may take up to 50 repetitions or more, so you may want to split this into several training sessions spread out over a couple of days.

Do not shut your dog in the crate until he is easily going in the crate without hesitation or fear. This may take a matter of hours OR may take several days. Go at your dog’s pace.

Now send your dog in with his cue word, KENNEL and shut the door. BEFORE your dog has a chance to whine, toss a handful of treats through the side window to the BACK of the crate and then open the crate door. Ignore the dog if he comes out of the crate (a leash can be threaded under your foot so he can’t run off to play). Let the dog choose to go back in on his own and when he does toss another handful of treats to the BACK of the crate, shut the door, count to five and then open it. Repeat until the dog WON’T come out of the crate even when you open the door.

Now, practice opening and closing the door. With your dog already in the crate, open the door, and toss a small yummy treat to the back of the kennel, and quickly close the door again. Repeat this 10 times in a row so that your dog associates the door being opened with something good being placed in the back of the crate (and this will also teach your dog not to bolt out the kennel door). Then open the door and ignore the dog. If he chooses to go back in the kennel OR never comes out after a count of five, then toss another handful of treats to the BACK of the kennel and shut the door. Count to 10 this time and repeat the opening the door, give treat in back and shut door for 5 times in a row. Then open the door and ignore the dog. If he chooses to stay in the crate, toss a handful of treats in the back of the crate.

Gradually increase the time the door is closed, remembering to toss treats to the BACK of the crate when the dog is relaxed and quiet. Start moving about the house, remembering to come back often and push treats to the BACK of crate to reward your dog.

Make a game out of being in the crate. Toss a treat towards the back of the kennel, and hold on to the dog so he can't get it thus increasing his desire to rush into the crate. Then, release the dog on cue such as "Go crate", or "In kennel" and let the dog leap into the crate. Hide treats and toys inside the crate (under a blanket or small towel) so the dog gets to search for fun objects.

If at any time, your dog willingly goes into his crate on his own, immediately rush over and put a handful of treats in the BACK of the kennel. A small treat canister can be kept near the crate for this purpose. You will know when the dog is ready to be left in the crate for longer time periods when he is both willing to explore the crate on his own and when he goes into the crate, lays down and remains there. Practice the above five or six times a day, each time increasing the time your dog has to spend in his crate by five minutes. Try moving into a different room when he is in his crate. Be ready to ignore your dog if he is whining. By the time you reach up to 40 minutes, your dog can safely be left in his crate for several hours at a stretch. Leave him for an hour or two inside his crate while you watch TV or clean house. Let him feel secure that he will not be left in there forever, that he will be let out eventually, and that you are not going to go away and forget about him forever. Just make sure he has been exercised heavily, has eliminated first, and gets his special chew toy when he goes in his crate for longer periods.

MY DOG KEEPS WHINNING/BARKING IN THE CRATE, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Try playing the crate game above with better rewards for staying IN the crate. Remember to ignore him when he comes out. You want to make being IN the crate more reinforcing than being outside the crate.

Try covering the crate with a blanket or towel. Many dogs settle down in a few minutes if they cannot see you.

Give your dog something REALLY wonderful to chew on when he is in the crate, such as a steak stuffed KONG or SQUIRREL DUDE. Remove it from him when he comes out of the crate.

Make sure your dog has had plenty of exercise BEFORE being placed in the crate longer than 20 minutes. A tired dog is sleeping, not crying.

Make sure your dog has recently eliminated before being crated for any length of time.

Remember NOT to let the dog out when he is crying. Try to wait until there is a moment of silence and then slip a treat to the BACK of the crate and then open the door.

OK, IT SOUNDS LIKE A CRATE WOULD HELP ME. ARE THERE ANY OTHER TIPS TO MAKE IT SUCCESSFUL?

You can make the crate more successful by always acting "happy" around the crate, making sure your dog is VERY tired if he has to spend more than an hour in the crate, and making sure your pet always gets a high value

stuffed Kong (a Kong stuffed with steak, chicken, turkey, hot dogs, etc.) to work on when he is in the crate. Do make sure that all your children understand, once the dog is in the crate, not to bother him (except to give him a treat if he is being calm and quiet of course!)

ARE THERE ANY OTHER ADVANTAGES TO HAVING A CRATE TRAINED DOG . . . BESIDES THE HOUSE TRAINING PART?

Well, a dog that feels secure in his crate is much easier to take on long trips than a dog that is left to jump excitedly around the inside of the car. Your dog does not get hit by falling camping gear, and is much safer should an accident occur. Hotels or motels are much more willing to allow dogs to stay if you bring your dog's crate, plus the maid isn't likely to accidentally let your dog loose into the streets of a strange city, should your dog be crated while you are out.

Dogs being shipped by plane or train feel much more secure and can handle the stress of traveling more easily if they have their own crate to travel in. Federal law requires that animals must be in crates when shipped by air or train.

OK, IT SOUNDS LIKE CRATE TRAINING IS AN EXCELLENT IDEA, BUT TELL ME, SHOULD EVERYONE CRATE TRAIN THEIR DOG?

Not necessarily, but if you are considering crate training as a method of housetraining, you should ask yourself these questions:

- Do you find yourself constantly punishing your dog for the same misbehaviors?
- Is your dog spending more and more time outside and less and less time with the family because of destructive or uncontrollable behavior?
- Do you have children under the age of 10 in your household? Is the once placid Rover now becoming snappish or too rough with your kids?
- Are you declining dinner invitations and only scheduling errands when you know someone else will be home to make sure the dog doesn't destroy the house while you are gone?
- Does your dog think his name is "BAD DOG?"

If you answered YES to any of these questions, then perhaps you should think more seriously about crate training. Even if you have none of these problems, crate training is a nice thing to do for your dog. Dogs love their crates. Plus you are preventing your dog from developing unwanted behaviors such as chewing and digging.

So give it a try. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Crate training is one approach to house-training and the prevention of destructive behaviors.

RECOMMENDED READING:

- **Positive Perspectives: Know Your Dog, Train Your Dog** - Pat Miller, 2008
- **The Power of Positive Training** - Pat Miller, Howell Books, 2001