

A Pet Owner's Guide to the Dog Crate

Far too many potentially good pets are misunderstood, unfairly punished, isolated, abused or simply “gotten rid of” by otherwise kind and well-meaning owners who are unable to prevent, control or live with common “problem” behaviour of puppies and young adult dogs. The correct use of a dog crate could give many of these innocent animals the chance they need, and deserve, to spend their lives as an appreciated pet of a satisfied owner.

What is a Dog Crate?

A dog crate is a rectangular enclosure with a top and a door, made in a variety of sizes proportioned to fit any type of dog. Constructed of wire, wood, metal, or molded fibreglass/plastic, its purpose is to provide guaranteed confinement for reasons of security, safety, housebreaking, protection of household goods, travel, illness, or just general control.

The dog crate has long been accepted, trusted and taken for granted by dog show exhibitors, obedience and field trial competitors, trainers, breeders, groomers, veterinarians, and anyone else who handles dogs regularly. Individual pet owner, however, usually reject the idea of using a crate because they consider such enforced confinement unfair, and even harmful to the dog.

Cruelty-or-Kindness?

As the pet owner see it: “it’s like a jail-it’s cruel-I’d never put MY dog in a cage like that!” If this is your first reaction to using a crate, you are a very typical pet owner. As a reasoning human being, you really value your freedom; and , since you consider your pet an extension of your family, it’s only natural to feel that closing him in a crate would be mean and inhuman, would probably cause him to resent and even to hate you, and might well result in psychological damage.

But--You Are Not a Dog!

As the dog sees it: “I love having a room/house of my very own; it’s my private special place, my security blanket, and the closed door really doesn’t bother me”. If your dog could talk, this is how he might well express his reaction to using a crate! He would tell you that the crate helps satisfy the “den instinct” inherited from his ancestors and relatives, and that he is not afraid or frustrated when he is closed in. He would further admit that he is much happier and more secure having his life controlled and structured by human beings--would far rather be prevented from causing trouble than be punished for it later.

So, To you it May be a “Cage”, BUT, to Him, It Is a “Home”

Use-But Don’t Abuse

The use of a dog crate is NOT recommended for a dog which must be frequently or regularly left alone for long periods of time, such as all or much of the day while the owner is away at work, school, etc. If it is attempted, the dog must be well exercised both before and after crating, given lots of personal, positive attention, and be allowed complete freedom at night (including sleeping near his owner). His crate must be large enough to permit him comfortably to stretch out fully on his side and to feel he has freedom of movement; it must be also equipped with a clip-on dish for water.

In the case of a puppy, the crate must be used strictly as a “play-pen” for general confinement, having a cosy box for sleeping at one end and the papers for elimination at the other, with clip-on

dishes for water and dry food. Although a puppy can be raised in this manner, the limited human supervision may result in his being poorly adjusted socially and difficult to housebreak and to train in general.

Crate or no crate, any dog constantly denied the human companionship and attention it craves is going to be a lonely pet and may find ways to express it.

What Kind of Crate is Best?

The most practical dog crate for use by the pet owner is the collapsible wire mesh type, available in a wide variety of sizes. Lightweight and easily handled, it allows total ventilation and permits the dog to see everything going on around him. A wooden, metal, or fibreglass/plastic airline crate will certainly also serve the purpose, but it restricts air and vision, is less convenient to handle and transport, and has a limited size selection.

What Size Should a Crate Be?

A crate should always be large enough to permit any dog to stretch out flat on his side without being cramped and to sit up without hitting his head on the top. While the adult size of a purebred puppy is fairly easy to predict, that of a mixed breed must be estimated based on general breed/body type and puppy size at a given age. It is always better to use a crate a little too large than one a little too small.

For a fully grown adult, measure the distance from the tip of his nose to base (not tip) of his tail and use a crate close to, but not less than, this length. The height and width of most crates are properly proportioned to the length, including the convenient “slant-front” models designed to fit station wagons and hatchbacks.

For a puppy, measure as above and add 12 inches for anticipated rapid growth. If a small crate is unavailable for temporary use, reduce the space of an adult sized crate (width can serve for length if the crate is large) with a reversed carton or a movable partition made of wire, wood, or Masonite. Remember that a crate too large for a young puppy defeats its purpose of providing security and promoting bowel control, so its space should always be limited in the beginning, except when being used as an over-all pen (see “Use--But don’t Abuse” Section)

Where Can I get One?

New crates may be purchased in retail pet shops and discount pet food/supplies outlets, through large catalogue sales firms (such as Sears), at the larger dog shows, from dog equipment catalogues, or from a crate manufacturer, prices depend on size, quality and make. Most brands include a removable tray/pan/floor and some can be specifically ordered with a door on the side instead of the end. The less expensive brands are quite adequate for most family pets, although those of non-plated/treated wire may discolour the coat of a light coated dog. A used crate can often be borrowed or found at a table/yard/garage/rummage sale at a bargain price.

Even the most expensive dog crate, however, is a “bargain” when compared to the cost of repairing or replacing a sofa, chair, woodwork, wallpaper or carpeting.

Where Should I Put It?

Since one of the main reasons for using a crate is to confine a dog without making him feel isolated or banished, it should be placed in a “people” area, kitchen, family room, etc. To provide an even greater sense of den security and privacy, it should be put in a corner and/or have the sides and back loosely draped in a sheet, large towel or light blanket which can easily be adjusted for desired

visibility or air. Top of the crate, when covered with a piece of plywood or piece of masonite, can serve as an extra shelf or table space.

Admittedly, a crate is not a “thing of beauty”, but it can be forgiven as it proves how much it can help the dog to be a welcome addition to the household!

Does a Crate Always Work?

Unfortunately, NO. Although a crate can indeed be used successfully by most pet owners, there are always those animals which simply can and will not tolerate this form of confinement. This reaction is not nearly as common with a young puppy (but it does happen!) As with an adult dog, especially an “adoptee” of unknown background, a dog which may somehow have suffered a traumatic frightening experience while crated, or an unadaptable “senior citizen”. Some purebred breeds also have an aversion to crates. In some cases, a dog will use a crate readily as long as the door remains open, but will object violently the moment it is closed and /or he is left alone. *It should be stressed here, however, that these reactions definitely represent the exception rather than the rule, and that most average pet dogs can successfully train to use a crate.*

If, despite every effort at positive conditioning and real firmness, a dog is obviously frantic or totally miserable when confined to a crate, forcing him to use one is indeed inhumane and can result in a real physical injury should he attempt to chew his way out.

Even though a crate may not always work, it IS always worth a try--because when it DOES prevent or solve a problem behaviour, it is truly the “best friend” you and your dog could ever have..

Author Credit:

This material has been furnished and prepared by the Nicki Meyer Educational Effort of Weston CT, and is based on information and experience gained by Mrs. Meyer during many years that she has provided dog crate information and rental service for pet owners in her area.

Crating The Puppy

How to use it.

Place the crate in a “people” area, the kitchen, if possible. For bedding, use an old towel or piece of old blanket which can be washed (should he have an accident) and some freshly worn unlaundered article of your clothing such as a tee shirt, old shirt, sweater, etc. Avoid putting newspaper in or under the crate, since its odor may encourage elimination; corrugated cardboard is better if there is no floor pan. A puppy need not be fed in the crate and will only upset a dish of water.

Make it very clear to children that the crate is NOT a playhouse for them, but a “special room” for the puppy, whose rights should be recognized and respected. However, you should accustom your puppy from the start to letting you reach into the crate at any time, lest he become overprotective of it.

Establish a “crate routine” immediately, closing the puppy in it at regular intervals during the day

(his own chosen nap times will guide you) and whenever he must be left alone for up to three hours. Give him a chew toy for distraction (check with your veterinarian for a safe variety, i.e. nylabone) and be sure to remove collar and tags which could become caught in an opening. In the beginning during the night, leave the door open and newspapers nearby, in an enclosed area (bathroom, laundry room, hallway) until the puppy has become well adjusted to his new life and can control his bowels for a longer period of time.

Even if things don't go too smoothly at first--**Don't weaken, don't worry, be consistent, be firm** and be very **aware** that you are doing your pet a real favour by preventing him from getting into trouble when left alone.

Increase the space inside the crate as the puppy grows so that he remains comfortable. If you do not choose, or are not able to use a crate permanently, plan to use it for at least 5 or 6 months or until the dog is well past the teething phase. (Initial teething takes place at 4-6 months, however, secondary teething-the setting of the teeth in the jaw takes from 9-12 months) During this time when most pet owners feel the visible teething is done is when most of the desire for the dog to chew occurs.

You can then start to leave the door open at night, when someone is at home during the day, or when he is briefly left alone. If all goes well for a week or two, and the dog seems reliable when left alone, remove the crate itself and leave the bedding in the same spot; although he will miss the crate enclosure, his habit of good behaviour should continue. Should you have any problem behaviour occur at a future time, however, the decision whether or not to use a crate longer, or perhaps permanently, will have to be made by you!

Even after a long period without a crate, a dog which has been raised in one will readily accept it again should the need arise for travel, illness, behaviour, etc. And may really welcome its return.

Crating an Adult Dog

Much of the usual problem behaviour of an older puppy(over six months) or an adult dog is caused by a lack of a feeling of security when left alone. Although a crate can fulfill this need, then hence hopefully solve the problems, it must still be introduced gradually, with every possible effort to be sure that the dog's first association with it is very positive and pleasant.

How To Use It

If possible, buy, borrow, or rent a crate of adequate size. Place it in a location where the dog will definitely feel part of the family (though still have some privacy), secure the door open so that it can't unexpectedly shut and frighten him, and do not put in any bedding. Encourage the dog to investigate this new object thoroughly, luring him inside by tossing "special" tidbits (cheese, liver, hot dog, etc. Which are even more tempting than regular dog treats) into the far end, then letting him turn and come back out-praising him enthusiastically. When he begins to enter the crate confidently, place his bedding and something of yours or a towel you have slept with inside and start coaxing him to lie down and relax, still using food if necessary. Continue this pattern for several days, encouraging him to use the crate as much as possible and shutting the door briefly while you sit beside him or there are people visible and/or audible nearby. Do not hesitate, however, to meet modest resistance with consistent firmness and authority so the dog will be aware of the behaviour you desire.

As soon as you feel confident that the dog will remain quietly in the closed crate (which could be from the beginning!) You may safely leave him alone. You may give him a chew toy or a safe bone

to absorb his attention and be sure that he has nothing around his neck which may become caught. If you are uncertain or anxious, leave him at first for only a brief period (1/2 to 1 hour) until he has proven that he will not resist the confinement. Once he has accepted the crate as his bed, and “own special place” your pet can stop being a problem and start being a pleasure! In due time, it may be possible to wean him off the crate without his resuming any problem behaviour.