

Crate Training

By Michelle Posage, DVM



Jail cell or safe haven- a dog crate is what you make of it.

Crates are popular with many dog owners, but the idea of confinement seems like a cruel prison sentence to some. When introduced positively and used correctly, a crate is a humane canine management tool.

The way in which you introduce the crate will largely determine your dog's opinion of it, and consequently, its usefulness. You want your dog to think of the crate as his very own den. If your dog feels safe and secure in his crate, he will use it as his favorite resting area and will adjust well to short periods of confinement.

A crate is exceedingly helpful in teaching a puppy to relieve himself outdoors. By taking advantage of the puppy's natural inclination to avoid soiling his resting area, crating will prevent accidents inside the house when you are unable to supervise. This allows you to focus on positively reinforcing your puppy's elimination behaviors outside.

Think of the crate as a crib or playpen for your puppy. Besides keeping your dog safe from potential household hazards, a crate will protect your valuable possessions from inevitable chewing. Long after a puppy is trained to relieve himself outdoors, a crate may still be necessary to curb chewing which can continue well into the second year of life.

Wire or plastic, collapsible or rigid—these things will not matter much to your dog. What does matter is the size and safety. For house training purposes, the crate should be only big enough for your dog to stand, sit, turn around, and lay down. Any larger and the untrained puppy may feel comfortable enough to soil one end of the crate. Buy a crate large enough to house the puppy when it is full grown, but section it off until he is bigger or becomes reliably trained.

When introducing a dog crate, keep the following pointers in mind:

- Keep the crate in a well used area of your home. Dogs are social animals and will adapt to a crate more easily if it is in the living room or bedroom.
- Associate the crate with positive experiences like feeding, treats, and play.
- Never confine your dog in his crate to punish misbehavior.
- Keep the door of the crate open until your puppy is comfortable in it.
- Keep initial confinement periods brief.
- Expect some protesting from puppies at first. Do not reward the puppy by letting him out when he cries or barks.
- Never leave your puppy in a crate for longer than it can control himself. A young puppy will need an opportunity to eliminate outside every 2-4 hours during the day.

Crate training is a way to provide safety and security for your pet when direct supervision is not possible. It aids training by preventing failure and setting your pet up for success. Should you ever have to hospitalize your dog or board at a kennel, he will be accustomed to the crate and less anxious about his stay. Best of all, the crate will reduce conflict between you and your puppy, so you can enjoy watching him grow into a well-behaved companion.

Dr. Michelle Posage is a veterinary behaviorist at the Animal Medical Center of New England, a specialty and emergency animal hospital. For more information or to schedule a personal consultation with Dr. Posage call 603.821.7222 or go to www.amcne.com.