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Crate Training – To Crate or Not To Crate, Is There Really a Question?

Introduction

In simplest terms, crates are “boxes” that contain dogs. They can be made of wire (steel), fabric, plastic or a combination of these materials. They can be “open” (the dog can see outside in all directions) or partially “closed” or shielded.

Crates are sometimes called “cages”. This is unfortunate terminology. Sadly, we might view animals as “caged” in a zoo or if they are “out of control”. It is true that a crate, or cage, is a restricted space. However, the critical difference is how the crate is used.

A crate must have a locking door. If a dog is in a crate with the door locked, he cannot hurt others (but he can still hurt himself – more on this later) and he cannot destroy his environment (the house, the car, etc.). The dog is physically “contained” and can be transported safely as well.

The physical constraint (“containment”) of a dog is often necessary under certain situations, but the best reasons for using a crate involve the positive emotions and security provided to the dog.

Once a dog feels comfortable in his crate, it can be an incredible device for everyone. Your dog will know he is secure in his sanctuary and that he will never be disturbed while in his safe place. On the flip side, you know your dog is safe, relaxed and happy. For some dogs, this process can happen quite quickly, but for others, we need to be deliberate and careful in our approach.

Many dogs benefit from a crate for their entire lives; for others, a crate can be discontinued in daily life and used only for special situations and without stress.

If the Crate is a Cage, Why Would I Use One?

Many mammals, including human children, love boxes – they are “dens” – places in which to hide from the world and “feel safe”. Wolves make dens for their puppies. So do many other animals. Why? For safety and security.

We use crates primarily for these reasons – safety and security for both the dog and others. A dog that is crate “trained” means he welcomes the crate as his safe spot.

As such, the crate must be, first and foremost, a dog’s sanctuary. It is his complete safe and secure spot. It must never be used for punishment. With proper acclimatization, the crate can serve other purposes such as allowing the dog to be safely transported and protected from outside influences.

Even if a dog is happy lying on the floor or in a dog bed and behaves properly with good manners and without stress with people in the house, there may still be times that a crate is necessary – for example, when the dog must be transported. You do not want your dog's first experience with a crate to be when he is forced into one and put in the cargo hold of an airplane or has to stay overnight at the veterinarian's office following surgery.

We must also remember that the use of the crate does not necessarily continue forever. It can be a highly effective and safe tool during the early months (for puppies and adopted dogs of all ages) of training and then discontinued if the dog prefers a bed, mat or other safe "place". However, some dogs will truly embrace their crates as sanctuaries will retire there voluntarily whenever they want peace and security.

What Size Do I Need and What Type of Crate?

Clearly, the crate must be large enough to accommodate the dog. It is advisable to get a size larger than might strictly be necessary so the dog can comfortably stand up and move around inside the crate.

Wire crates are strongly recommended for use in the home (smaller fabric or plastic crates can be useful in the car; transporting a dog by train, boat or airplane typically requires a specialized crate). Wire crates are durable, "collapsible" (can be folded to a relatively flat state) and the dog can see out in all directions. However, some dogs prefer to be "shielded" from the outside and only have a view to the outside from the front of the crate (think about a fox or wolf den). Indeed, some dogs are comforted most during stressful situations (e.g., having guests over) when the entire crate is covered. Draping a sheet over the crate is the easiest and most flexible way to adapt the "covering" to suit the dog and situation.

Where to Begin?

First, it is important to know that dogs can be "crate trained" at any age and even if they have had prior bad experiences with a crate (but this will take extra time and care).

Set up the crate, put comfortable bedding inside, add a few toys and leave the door open. Don't even attempt to put the dog in the crate for at least a few days. Simply ignore the crate and allow the dog to adjust to its presence.

After a few days, or if the dog shows interest in going inside the crate on his own, throw treats into the crate. Do not physically put the dog into the crate. Once the dog is inside the crate, continue to treat with the door open. Offer praise and kind words. Ensure the treats are placed onto the bedding, not given by hand. We want the dog to associate the pleasure of food with the bedding *inside* the crate, not your hand. Then, get up and walk away. The dog will likely follow you. Play a game or do something enjoyable (e.g., quiet physical contact). Then go back to the crate and throw more treats inside. At this point, a verbal command is not used.

Rather quickly, most dogs will be completely comfortable being inside the crate with the door still open. The next step is to close the door. We do this very briefly and remain outside in full view. Then, open the door and let the dog decide to come out on his own. Slowly, increase the amount of time with the door closed. While the door is closed, remain beside the crate, but *do not coddle or talk to your dog at all*. Do not say "It's okay" even if your dog whines. With the door closed, you can then

walk away (but remain in the room). Do not get worried if the dog cries or scratches at the crate. Give him some time to settle. Then go back to the crate and open the door and throw some treats inside (do not treat outside the crate). We are teaching the dog that the crate is not a permanent state, he has some control to go into it (and come out of it) and that people will return and life continues normally without fuss.

This process continues in increments until you can leave the room with the crate door closed. You can try putting a sheet over the top of the crate (leave the front open for now). With a slow, staged approach, the dog will realize the crate – with the door closed – is a comfortable and non-threatening place and that you will return.

Many dogs can progress through these stages and accept the crate very quickly, some within a single day! However, you must not rush the process if your dog shows any sign of hesitation or distress.

What Happens Next?

You will need to figure out the best placement of the crate and whether your dog prefers a covering (sheet). It is advisable to try the sheet (slowly, with the front open) because it can be very calming for some dogs to be visually shielded from the environment, but of course they can still smell and hear what is happening around them.

We often want our dogs in crates when we leave the house. Start by leaving the room for 5 minutes, then 15 minutes, then 30 minutes and then an hour. You can then try leaving the house for 15, 30 and 60 minutes. When you return, even if the dog appears in distress (whining, barking, etc.), do not react. Come into the room and start talking to others (or yourself). You can then acknowledge your dog (“Hi Rover, I am back.”) in a calm voice and open the crate door and walk away. Once the dog is in another room or across the room, have your greeting and throw a ball or get the leash for a walk. We want the opening of the crate door upon your return to be a completely natural thing – a so-called “non-event”. Do not act as if you are “rescuing” your dog from the crate (or from your absence).

Of course, your dog will be happy upon your return and he will want to come out to greet you, but he should not be frantic to “escape the crate”. He needs to learn patience and know that when the crate door opens it is his choice to come out and it is as natural as walking from one room to another. Don’t make a fuss at the crate opening; instead, walk into the room, ask your dog to “do something” (get a toy, give a paw, etc.). Maybe throw a ball, but then calmly create a “break” by talking to someone else, washing your hands or whatever. Then you can take your dog for a walk, go into the yard for play or do a puzzle. The point is to “condition” your dog to all aspects of the crate and he will accept them as normal, calming and happy (but not ecstatic) events.

How Do I Get My Dog to Go Into and Come Out of the Crate?

Never physically put your dog into the crate or take him out of the crate unless absolutely necessary. Why not? Because your dog *must view the crate as his safe place and sanctuary*, not a “cage” into which he is forced (or from which he is extracted against his will).

With the appropriate training and progression cited above, your dog should readily go into the crate if a treat is thrown inside and he should not be agitated when the door is closed/locked. At this point, we can start to attach a verbal cue to this activity. You might choose the word “crate”. It is a unique word and not often heard in daily conversation. Train the word “crate” with positive reinforcement as

you would other commands. A marker (e.g., clicker) can be very helpful. With consistency, your dog will soon go happily to his crate upon cue.

Getting your dog out of the crate is usually easy. Simply and calmly (without fuss or any talking), open the crate door. Your dog will very likely come out. However, if the dog wants to be in his crate (i.e., the door is open and he is resting), never enter the crate to retrieve your dog (unless there is an emergency such as a fire). Let him choose when to exit the crate.

If you want your dog to come out, just casually cross the room and call your dog “Rover, come” or invite him to engage in another activity “Rover, let’s walk” if that is what you intend (do not trick your dog – follow through on your suggestion to walk or play). You don’t need to call him for dinner – he will come out when he hears the routine of dinnertime. Let him make that choice.

What If My Dog Has Separation Anxiety?

Dogs with anxiety or stress disorders need special attention. Please consult a professional dog trainer for advice as every situation is different. We must also take care with adopted (rescued) dogs before we attempt to use the crate too quickly. However, many rescued and adopted dogs ultimately adapt well to and benefit greatly from a crate.

Separation anxiety is relatively common behaviour in dogs, especially re-homed (adopted) dogs. It can manifest in various ways, but the dog can often be quite destructive in his attempt to calm himself. While using a crate can prevent damage to your house and furniture, it could be extremely dangerous to your dog. Your dog might literally try to bite his way out of the crate.

A crate can be a fantastic place ultimately to help the dog with anxiety (separation anxiety or other), but other treatments and tools are required first or in careful combination with the use of a crate. Professional advice is highly recommended in dealing with anxiety issues.

Critical Things to Remember When Using a Crate

- Train the use of the crate slowly. Some dogs will adapt quickly; others take much more time.
- The crate is your dog’s safe place (his sanctuary). Never disturb your dog when he is in the crate unless there is an emergency.
- Never use the crate as punishment.
- The crate can be used when your dog should/must be alone (e.g., he is anxious or reactive with guests). Some dogs can tolerate guests when they are in their crates with a sheet draped over the sides. They “feel” part of the social scene and can hear/smell their owners voices, but they have no pressure to interact physically with anyone.
- Do not let people interact physically with your dog when he is in the crate. They can say “hello” or recognize him, but they should not touch the dog or “crouch” down.
- Never feel sorry for your dog when using the crate. Do not say “It’s okay” or “poor girl, I will be back”. Instead, if you are leaving – say “love you, see you soon” in a positive voice (and come back relatively soon!).

- Don't feel you have to discontinue use of the crate. Some dogs want the safety, peace and security of their crates forever.
- Once the dog "trusts" his crate, you can move it around. The placement is not as important as the crate itself.
- Never leave a dog in a car (in a crate or not) when the outside ambient temperature is higher than 22C. In such conditions, ensure the windows are partially down (to allow air flow) and that you are parked in the shade. This is not a rule. Dogs can overheat in cars extremely quickly so you must be cautious
- Never leave your dog alone (unattended) in a car for more than 30 minutes, no matter the outside conditions.
- Dogs can sleep overnight in suitably sized crates (i.e., large enough for them to stand up and stretch). Ensure they have relieved themselves before "going to bed" and that they have had appropriate physical exercise. Never leave a dog at night in a crate with a locked door for more than 10 hours even if your dog sleeps that long. Ideally, unlock the door after 8 hours and let the dog decide. These are conservative values, but err on the side of caution – the longer you leave a dog in a locked crate, the greater the chance of problems, even for "crate trained" dogs.
- During the day, dogs should never be left in crates for more than 6 hours. For many dogs, even this is too long (3-4 is the maximum). They need access to fresh air, water and physical/emotional stimulation. Puppies often can only manage a couple of hours before they need to "go out".
- Inside a house, heat regulation matters a lot. Most dogs can manage fairly cool temperatures (above 7C) in a crate when it is padded with a mat and a blanket, but puppies, older dogs and those without an "undercoat" of fur may require special attention
- During the summer (hot months), dogs can overheat quickly – much faster than human beings. Wolves evolved (mostly) to deal with cooler conditions and such your dog isn't inherently capable of handling higher temperatures and definitely not high humidity. A dog has very few means to dissipate heat (panting) and cannot sweat effectively (paws, armpits) with a body of hair. When leaving a dog in a crate during hot/humid period in the house)
 - Never leave a dog outside in crate.
 - Ensure access to fresh water.
 - Ensure air flow and air conditioning to maintain a relative temperature below 24C (this must consider humidity as well, not just ambient temperature).
- Note: Some breeds can tolerate much wider temperature variations than others. The above information is just a guide and not applicable to all dogs (e.g., older dogs and dogs with health conditions require special care – follow the advice of your veterinarian), but please observe and know your dog. You will then understand his tolerance for and sensitivity to heat and cold and other conditions. Always remember, dogs need access to fresh water throughout the year.

- Dogs will almost never soil their crates, but do not abuse this idea (it is also a myth – all dogs will eventually relieve themselves as will all animals). However, crates can be great for house-training puppies if you use them for short periods (2 hours or less) during the day at rest times. Just be sure to take your puppy outside for a pee and poop as soon as he is out of the crate – don't delay!
- Leave some suitable objects inside the crate for your dog's enjoyment. This depends on the age and temperament of the dog. Hard and chewable toys can be great. Some dogs enjoy stuffed toys (others will destroy them inside the crate, but not outside – so be careful).
- Never put two (or more) dogs into the same crate even if the dogs are housemates. Young puppies (littermates) are an exception – take the advice of the breeder or caregiver. Never put a cat (or any other animal) inside a crate with a dog.