

To Crate or Not to Crate

Karin Larsen Bridge

Get S.M.A.R.T dogs

A dog 'crate' is a container designed to safely confine dogs on a short term basis. Once used only for competitions, travel, or convalescence, the crate has increasingly found it's way into the average pet home. Introduced correctly and used appropriately it can perform many valuable functions including preventing early mistakes in housetraining and destructive chewing. Used inappropriately or to excess it can become a very poor substitute for training and the development of a real relationship with your dog.

A crate IS:

- A suitable substitute for the traditional dog bed or basket with the added advantage of having a door (usually open but with the option of closing as required).
- Suitable for short term confinement (with the door shut) in order to achieve a specific purpose e.g. prevent house soiling for a brief period if you cannot supervise.
- A tool useful to assist in the teaching of proper housetraining, good chew habits and a certain degree of self control or ability to 'settle'.

A crate is NOT:

- A punishment.
- A storage system for dogs
- A suitable long term confinement area
- A substitute for teaching your dog house etiquette

Advantages of Crate Training

Many people balk at the idea of having a crate in their home. Depending on the size of their dog, a crate is a little more noticeable than other types of dog beds. However a crate has one great option that other dog beds and kennels do not – it has a door – giving you the option of short term, safe confinement when and if necessary. Getting your dog use to and comfortable in a crate may prove valuable throughout your dog's life in a variety of ways:

- A crate can provide confinement without isolation. There is no need to lock your dog in the bathroom or laundry for a little time out, far better to place the crate in a busy family area to

expose your puppy to family sights and sounds.

- For puppies, the crate can be moved to a bedroom at night allowing you to provide comfort, companionship and supervision while restricting free range. It also allows you to maintain toileting protocols taking the puppy outside if necessary.
- A crate can provide a time out and/or safety zone for your dog for a variety of reasons such as – when visitors first arrive, escape from small children, safety from another visiting dog or at anytime when you may not be able to supervise.
- A crate allows you to limit puppy destructiveness by providing and promoting the development of appropriate chew toy habits e.g. developing a desire and focus on stuffed kongs or bones.
- A dog that is crate trained is likely to feel less stress when confinement is necessary at other times e.g. at the vets, a boarding kennel, or to travel by plane or train
- A crate is an ideal ‘home away from home’ when traveling, staying with friends etc. who may not appreciate a free range pet.
- A crate is ideal for periods of convalescence after injury or illness.

Introducing a Crate

Step 1

Set up the crate in a well socialized part of the home with the door open. Place some appealing soft bedding into the crate and rotate a variety of chew toys, treats and smelly items of clothing such as your socks into the crate as well. Limit the number of interesting items available outside the crate. The dog should come to associate the crate with good things and comfort. Don't be in a hurry to close the door. Ideally, your dog will be seeking out the crate to have a rest even before you ever attempt to close the door. Feed the dog in the crate multiple times throughout the course of the day. Provide long lasting chew toys in the crate. Have water in the crate (there are water bowls that attach to the side of a crate as in a bird cage to prevent spillage). Sometimes, put food in the crate and lock your dog out for a brief period, when you open the door he should be keen to rush in and access the ‘prize’.

Step 2.

Toss a treat into the crate with an exaggerated arm move – eventually this will become your signal to enter the crate. Repeat until your dog is moving in happily. At this point you may wish to add a word as well such as ‘In you go’ at the same time as your arm gesture. Next, repeat arm gesture but withhold treat until after your dog is in the crate and has turned around then reward again – in the crate.

Step 3

When your dog is happily obliging entering the crate, shut the door for just a few seconds and treat through the door. Open door and release. Next step is to keep the door shut just a little longer. If the dog is quiet praise, toss a few treats inside then release *before* he begins to whine or bark.

Step 4

VARY the duration of the confinement starting with just a few seconds and building slowly to about 15 – 30 minutes. When first asking for longer periods, set yourself up for success by playing with your dog or going for a walk beforehand and/or throw in a very desirable chew toy as well – so your dog should be happy to comply. Note VARY means just that – don't always make it harder – sometimes confine for shorter periods so your dog never knows how long to expect. Next, take the crate to different rooms in the house to make sure your dog is comfortable in the crate in different

areas.

Be careful never to :-

- release your dog from the crate while he is barking or whining – wait until there is a quiet moment then praise and release. If your dog is barking or whining a lot you have probably rushed the introduction and need to go back to shorter periods of confinement. Build only on success – when you have a quiet, contented dog in the crate – release.

- give your crate ‘emotional baggage’ by using it as a punishment tool. e.g.” Bad dog! Into the crate you go!” While it is ok to give your puppy a little time out in the crate if he’s sending you crazy – don’t add any negative emotions to it – simply place him in the crate with a small chew toy in a pleasant way, shut the door and give yourself a chance to relax.

Using a crate to Houstrain your dog.

Crates are probably most often recommended as a way to train or retrain a house soiling problem. The crate ‘supervises’ your puppy when you cannot working on the theory (true in most but not all cases) that a dog does not like to soil it’s own bed. Every hour on the hour take your puppy outside to pee. If it does praise and reward with a food treat. Bring the puppy inside and let it play free for a half hour or so then put it back in the crate before repeating the cycle again. If the puppy does not pee when taken outside, it gets no free play but is popped immediately back into the crate for about 10 minutes when you try again. By confining the puppy at this early stage, you are ensuring your dog will earn the right to have much greater access to the home as he matures.

Precautions when using a crate.

As with any training tool certain precautions are necessary:

- Do not crate a puppy wearing a collar or head halter.
- Crates should be placed in well socialized parts of the house where you are able to supervise your puppies behaviour and stress level.
- Place crates in areas free of drafts and/or excessive heat or cold
- Never use your crate as punishment.
- Never allow children to tease or play with a puppy or dog confined in a crate.
- A puppy or dog should never be confined for a period longer than it’s next expected toilet break.
- Water should be provided if a dog is likely to be crated for longer periods.
- Crate confinement of 12 hours a day or more should not be a way of life for a companion animal. Severe behavioural problems can develop due to excessive confinement.
- Crates are not a substitute for unresolved behavioural problems which require behaviour modification and training.

Conclusion

There are definite advantages to training your dog to accept short term confinement in a crate which can be both a useful ‘settle spot’ and safety zone in the home and a transportable ‘home away from home’ when traveling. The important thing to remember is that, as with any tool it should be used

with thought and care to *enhance* not replace a strong relationship with your dog .

Types of Crates

There are more types of crates available today than ever before.

Airline Crate – a plastic box , mostly enclosed with a wire screen door.

Best for travel .

Metal Crate- strong, well ventilated, easy to clean. Great for teaching crate training due to it's strength. Disadvantage: ungainly to move around, heavy, and less attractive than some of the canvas options.

Canvas Crates

Can be zipped up for very light portable use or with aluminum frames – assembled quickly, easy to transport and carry. Good ventilation/view. Attractive.

Disadvantage: if dogs are not used to being crated they can be easily destroyed.