

CRATE TRAINING

HOW AND WHY TO USE THIS EFFECTIVE TRAINING TOOL

The dog crate is a wonderful training tool. Apart from its obvious uses for transporting dogs by car or plane, the crate may be used for short-term confinement – to keep the dog out of mischief at times when the owner is not able to supervise. Confining the dog to the crate prevents it from developing bad habits. In addition, the crate may be used specifically to create good household habits: to housetrain the dog, to establish a chewtoy habit, and to reduce hyperactivity and barking. However, sometimes crate training backfires, and misuse of the crate by novice owners may produce a dog that is more difficult to housetrain, more active and unruly, more vocal and destructive, and maybe aggressive!

The ubiquitous acceptance of the crate within the dog fancy makes its use almost second nature. However, what may be routine and accepted practice for a breeder or trainer may be unpleasant or difficult for novice owners. Explaining that a crate is the dog's den is all fine and dandy. More convincing, though, is for a prospective owner to see a young pup run happily into its crate and settle down for a nap.

MISUSE = ABUSE

Crate training problems usually arise because owners fail to teach the dog to like the crate, and leave untrained dogs confined for too long. If the owner has not accustomed the dog to the crate, it will not enjoy confinement, and might run from the owners when called and/or resist and resent being manhandled into the crate. Once confined, the dog might bark out frustration and try to destroy the crate in an attempt to escape. If confined for too long, the dog will soil the crate.

Whether or not an adult dog likes its crate depends on when the crate was initially introduced and how. If the dog was taught to enjoy the crate during puppyhood, it will prefer resting in its doggy den as an adult (this is easily tested by leaving the crate door open).

However, an adolescent dog, allowed complete freedom of house and garden since puppyhood, might object to lengthy confinement unless previously trained to enjoy the crate.

INTRODUCING THE CRATE

No matter how much the dog enjoys its crate, there will be occasions when the owner wants to confine the dog but the dog does not want to be confined. Therefore, never call the dog and put it in the crate, or else it will soon become wary of approaching its owner when called. Instead, use a place command: "Go to your crate." It is possible to enforce a place command without ruining the dog's recall.

Tell the puppy/dog "Go to your crate," lure it towards the crate with a food treat (kibble from dinner), and give the lure as a reward when the pup settles down inside. Praise the pup and periodically hand feed kibble while the pup is inside, but ignore the pup the moment it leaves. Feed the pup in the crate. Place pieces of kibble in the crate so the pup will develop the habit of visiting the crate on its own. And whenever it does, praise the pup and offer especially tasty food treats, ignoring the pup when it leaves. The pup will soon learn it gets lots of attention, affection and goodies inside the crate, but very little outside.

Now accustom the pup to short confinement. Throw a treat in the crate and close the door long enough to give the pup two or three tasty treats through the gate, then open the crate. Repeat this many times over. It is important that the pup learns confinement does not necessarily mean "for the duration," but, rather, for a short time – and a good time.

PLACE TRAINING

A dog crate is a marvelous place to send the dog when the house gets busy or when the owner just wants a little peace and quiet. It is important to familiarize the dog with the crate as early on as possible so that controlled, quiet periods set the precedent for adult life. Learning to "turn the dog off" – to frequently instruct the pup to settle down and shush – is a priority obedience exercise for pet owners.

The length of time a dog may be confined to a crate depends on whether it is housetrained. To confine an unhousetrained dog to a crate for lengthy periods is courting disaster. If the dog is forced to soil its sleeping area, the crate may no longer be effective in inhibiting elimination, and therefore cannot be used as a predicting tool in housetraining.

HOUSETRAINING

A dog crate may be used extremely effectively as a housetraining tool. Housesoiling is a spatial problem, and confinement is the solution: The dog is eliminating in the wrong place, and if confined and not allowed free access to the living rooms and bedrooms, it cannot soil the carpets. However, long-term confinement to a small area to prevent housesoiling should not be confused with short-term confinement to a crate during housetraining.

The purpose of long-term confinement to a small area (with both sleeping/eating quarters and a toilet zone) is to confine the problem at times when the owner cannot supervise the dog. Acknowledging the puppy/dog will have to eliminate during the course of the day, the owner confines the dog to an area where it is acceptable for the dog to eliminate.

Confining the dog outdoors is fine, since from the beginning the dog develops the good habit of eliminating outside. Confining the dog to a room indoors is sometimes a temporary necessity until the dog is housetrained.

However, during housetraining, the purpose of short-term close confinement (crate training) is to inhibit the dog from eliminating at all. Then the dog will want to eliminate immediately when released from confinement and taken to its toilet area.

The single most important use of the crate for housetraining is as a tool to predict when the dog will eliminate. This vital piece of information must be communicated to novice dog owners.

When away from home, keep the puppy in its long-term confinement area – the kitchen, utility room, basement, outdoor run or kennel. When at home, confine the pup to its crate in the same room as the family, so the pup is not socially isolated. Every hour, run the puppy to its elimination area and give it three minutes to produce. If it does, praise and give food treats. If it doesn't, back in the crate for another hour.

CHEWING

When the owner is home, confine the puppy as much as possible to its crate with a variety of chewtoys. A chewtoy is an appropriate item to chew which the dog can neither destroy nor consume. Confining a dog to a crate with a chewtoy is like confining a child to an empty room with a Nintendo. This is called passive training. All the owner has to do is set up the situation, and the dog is autoshaped via self-reinforcement (successive munches on a chewtoy will progressively reinforce chewing the chewtoys). As the dog becomes hooked on its chewtoy habit, regular chewtoy sessions soon comprise an integral part of the dog's day.

The passive learning process may be augmented by making chewtoys especially attractive and/or novel. If the dog does not destroy rawhide, different rawhide toys may be soaked in a variety of soups and then dried so the dog may have a unique rawhide flavor-of-the-day. Or, fairly indestructible toys may be stuffed with tasty treats. A dog biscuit forced inside a Kong or some freeze-dried liver squished into the cavity of a Redi-bone make irresistible toys. The dog knows the treats are there, and will worry at the chewtoy forever trying to get them out.

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