



Overview: Crate Training for dogs

By Jeff Coltenback

Crate training a puppy or even an adult dog can be very helpful in managing behavioral problems like housebreaking, marking (different from housebreaking), chewing, destructive habits and more. From a housebreaking standpoint, it is helpful to start in the crate. Dogs are less likely to pee and poop where they eat and sleep. Providing a crate affords owners the ability to teach the dog to be comfortable in the crate and to help the dog strengthen its bladder and bowels. I also believe it is appropriate to crate train a dog for medical or other reasons. What if your dog, at some point in its life needs to be vetted for an extended period of time? The dog will have experience with being in a crate. Or, what if that emergency situation arises and you have to board your dog or have to confine her for travel reasons? What if you have to take a road trip with your dog or your dog doesn't ride well in a vehicle? Crating in a vehicle is safer for the dog, the passengers and the driver. The dog will already have been exposed to crating. Crate training has some controversial opinions surrounding it. Much of the controversy is consistent with another contentious topic that dogs are pack animals. I believe they are pack animals. I believe in the social structure of the canine family unit. Whether you believe in the pack aspect or not, it is undeniable that dogs are den animals. Dogs prefer having a safe haven where the pack/family unit can retreat to for comfort, safety and the like. Consequently, there are many reasons to crate train a dog. And, it ultimately is the dog owner's choice. It is our responsibility as trainers to be able to teach owners how to do it properly. Below are some bullets that illustrate some key points and techniques on how to crate train properly. Some useful tips for crate training:

- The bedding in a crate depends on the dog/puppy. Some will tear up any blankets or beds. An option is to use fleece throws as they are less hazardous if torn up. Towels, comforters, etc can be hazardous to dogs of all ages. For puppies, it is certainly appropriate to just line the crate with newspaper or shredded newspaper even in the event they have an accident: pee or poop. The shredded newspaper will keep the dog clean and dry.
- The crate should always be introduced in a positive way; food treats, toys, bones, etc
- The crate should NEVER be used as punishment. Now, let's be realistic. Puppies and young dogs can be annoying at times – lol. They can be rambunctious or destructive. So, sometimes they need to be crated to allow the owner time to tend to other matters in the household: i.e. chewed up pillow or pee on the floor. This is a time when we are crating them, technically, because they did something wrong elsewhere. And, the dog may be put in the crate for doing something wrong. Nevertheless, the actual placing of the dog in the crate needs to be done positively and with a treat. The crate is always positive!
- Always introduce the crate with high value food and allow the dog to go in and out on its own at first WITHOUT shutting the crate door. We want the dog to associate the crate with food resources and fun at first and not only confinement.
- Size: When considering size, the larger the crate the better. However, if it is too large a dog or puppy that you are trying to housebreak may still eliminate in a crate that is too large. So, the rule of thumb when introducing a crate for housebreaking purposes is that the crate should be just roomy enough for the dog/pup to stand up turn around and lay down. Another approach for pups and small breed owners whose schedule may not permit letting the pup out every few hours is this: You can use an oversized crate and split the crate in half: half bedding and half newspaper/wee pads. I don't like wee pad training (see housebreaking tips PDF). But, it is sometimes necessary for people with scheduling issues or other considerations such as those who live in a high rise building that may not be conducive to getting a young puppy out in time to eliminate.

- A young dog or puppy can generally hold in their bladder for one hour more than they are age-wise in months. So, a 5 month old puppy can likely “hold it in” for 6 hours. A 7 month old puppy can likely hold it in for 8 hours. Puppies less than 5 months old should still be let out 4 hours or more often if needed. Small breed dogs have smaller EVERYTHING, including a bladder. So, the amount of time a small breed can hold it in will likely be far less than a larger dog.
- The dog should eat at least one meal per day inside the crate. This will expedite housebreaking/crate training from a soiling perspective (dogs usually don’t pee and poop where they eat and sleep).
- The crate should not only be used when owners go out. You don’t want the puppy or dog associating the crate with the departure of their people. So, owners should also use the crate when they are home as well so the pups view the crate as merely a part of their environment/life. One scenario is to put the dog in the crate when the family is eating or doing laundry or maybe cooking. Again, we don’t want any negative association with the crate. Some folks even opt to have crates in a couple of locations in the house so the pup can still be in their presence. For instance, you can have the primary crate in a specific location. And, another crate can be placed in the bedroom for sleep time. This way the pup is with the “pack” at bedtime which is effective in bonding as “packs” sleep at the same time and together, among other things (hunting – i.e. walking; travelling; i.e. walking). We discuss the importance of walking in another course. But, you get the idea.
- Multi dog households: Although many folks allow for dogs to share a crate, I am not of that mindset. We want the crate to be a safe secure place for each dog; especially since it is impossible to predict how a young dog will coexist in a small area with another dog. Additionally, it helps promote independence. Many young pups will often develop a dependency on one another. This is ok for most social interactions. But, the crate should be dedicated to one dog. The crates can be near or even next to each other.
- To let them out of the crate or not: Never let a whining or barking or whimpering dog out of the crate. Doing so will only reward the dog’s behavior. We know about how effective positive reinforcement is. Well positive reinforcement works really well for rewarding unwanted behaviors as much, if not more so, as rewarding preferred behaviors. A dog learns to sit because a treat is presented after the successful behavior. Well, guess what? A dog will learn, VERY QUICKLY, to bark and whine and whimper if that behavior works in getting you to let them out of the crate while they are doing so. Exceptions? Yes, there are exceptions to every rule. If you have a young puppy or maybe a geriatric or sick dog that you know has to relieve itself, then physical well being and relief prevails and you should allow the dog out to eliminate. If it’s a puppy and you have the puppy on a consistent schedule that is appropriate for its age, you should be able to wait until the barking stops and then let the dog out when it is quiet. Remember, we don’t want to inadvertently reward unwanted behaviors.

Various Types of Dog Crates

Wire Crate



Airline Crate



Soft Crate



Open Pen

