

# **A Pet Owner's Guide to the Dog Crate**

By Susan Carney

## **WHAT is a dog crate?**

A dog crate is a rectangular enclosure with a top and a door, made in a variety of sizes, proportioned to fit any size of dog. Constructed of wire or molded plastic, its purpose is to provide a safe haven, "bedroom" or den for your dog to call his or her own. Crating will also provide security, safety, house training assistance, travel assistance and a cozy bed for nighttime.

## **Why a crate?**

The goal of a crate or kennel is to assist with training, not to take the place of training. As humans, we value our freedom and of course feel that a dog must be the same. However, given a choice, when left alone, most dogs will find a den or hiding spot and fall asleep until we return. Dogs live for their owners or the pack, not sunshine, fresh air and freedom. If used correctly the crate will be a substitute for the natural instinct of dogs, to den. Again it will assist you in housetraining, keeping your dog safe, and setting boundaries for overall control.

## **Why not just keep him / her outside?**

Dogs living or staying outside without owners will not work for many reasons. The two biggest are that it is not safe. Rabies, wildlife, disrespectful kids or strangers can harm your dog. Not to mention that a tied dog has no escape. Another reason is instinct; when a dog is left behind in the wild, it does not wait for you or the pack to return, OUTSIDE of the territory or safety zone. Dogs survive by sticking together, claiming a territory and staying IN it. Other dogs automatically do NOT go into another's territory.

I think we all know that dogs have been domesticated for hundreds of years and some have a hard time comparing them to wolves or wild dogs. Nevertheless, remember a dog is a dog and they will always revert to animal instinct when other things do not work.

## **It is a dog's world!**

Dogs choose, in the wild, to live in packs and use self-made dens for housing. If your dog could talk, it would tell you that it has a natural instinct to "den" inherited from its ancestor, the wolf. A dog with a den is much happier, has fewer behavior issues, and is more confident with the control that a structured environment provides. Dogs would much rather be prevented from causing trouble, than be punished for it later.

## **How not to use a Crate!**

Crating is a temporary tool used for puppies to housetrain and to prevent destructive behavior. The goal is to gradually reduce the puppies' need for the crate until it can be safely left alone. In the case of the adult dog with a behavior problem, the goal is also to gradually reduce your need for the crate. Again, using it only as a tool to prevent the problem while in training.

It is not recommended for a dog regularly left alone all day and the maximum amount of time any adult dog should spend in a crate safely is about 6 hours. If crated for 6 hours the dog must be well exercised both, before and after crating, given lots of personal attention, and not crated at night. It is also most important that the crate be large enough to permit him or her to comfortably stretch out on its side and have ample freedom of movement.



Crating a dog for an entire workday or longer (eight plus hours) is not acceptable. Dogs do require more sleep than the average human (about 15 hours a day) but no dog can be expected to live his or her life crated. Crate or no crate, any dog constantly denied the human companionship it needs and craves is going to be a lonely pet - and will find alternate ways to express boredom, anxiety, stress and depression.

Be sure to remove your dogs' collar or use a quick release collars when your dog or pup is crated. Choke chains can become caught and cause severe injury or death.

### **What Kind of Crate should I use?**

Remember the crate is a substitute for the natural den dogs seek. A dog will look at it as a home base, safe haven and even a place to hide and sleep when alone, frightened or stressed. A wire mesh cage does not provide a den atmosphere, but can be easier to fold up and transport or put away. Simply covering a portion of the wire mesh crate or kennel will better provide a hiding space. A plastic airline crate is great for re-creating a hiding spot or den. The door is removable and most models are easy to break down. Remember that every dog is different and what works for one will not always work for another.

### **What size crate should I get?**

A crate should always be large enough to permit any size dog to stretch out flat on its side without being cramped and to sit up without hitting its head on the top. While the adult size of a purebred puppy is easy to predict, you will have to estimate that of a mixed breed based on general breed/body type and puppy size at a given age. It is always better to use a crate a little too large than one a little too small.

For a fully-grown adult dog, measure the distance from tip of nose to base (not tip) of tail and use a crate close to, but not less than, this length. The height and width of most crates are properly proportioned to the length, including the convenient "slant-front" models designed to fit station wagons and hatchbacks.

For a puppy, measure as above, than add about 12" for anticipated rapid growth. Reduce the extra space of a too large crate with a reversed carton or a moveable/removable partition made of wire, wood or a rolled up blanket. Remember that a crate too large for a young puppy (the puppy can walk back and forth from front to back.) defeats its purpose of providing security and promoting bowel control, so its space should always be limited in the beginning.

### **Where can I get one?**

The NHSPCA has used crates for sale and just about every pet store carries them. Prices depend on size, quality, and make. The NHSPCA often has used crates for sale as well.

For information on crates available at the NHSPCA's call 603-772-2921 Ext. 110

### **Where should I put the crate?**

When using a crate to confine a dog during training, it is important to avoid making him feel isolated or banished. Place the crate in, or as close as possible to, a "people" area—kitchen, family room, etc. Be sure to select a spot free from drafts and not too near a direct heat source. The top of the crate, when covered with a piece of plywood can also serve as a handy extra shelf or table space. Admittedly, a dog crate is not a "thing of beauty"—but it can be forgiven for not being a welcome addition to the household decor as it proves how much it can help the dog to remain a welcome addition.



Often an adult dog will already have a favorite spot in the home. Putting the crate near or in that same area is a great way to start.

### **Crating the Puppy**

A young puppy (8-16 weeks) should normally have no problem accepting a crate as his “own place.” Any complaining s/he might do at first is caused not by the crate, but by his learning to accept the controls of his unfamiliar new environment. Actually, the crate will help your puppy adapt more easily and quickly.

Make it very clear to children that the crate is NOT a playhouse for them, but a “special room” for the puppy, whose rights should be recognized and respected. However, you should accustom the puppy from the start to letting you reach into the crate at any time, lest he becomes overprotective of it.

### **Short Term Confinement**

Puppies cannot be expected to “hold it” for an entire workday. Keep in mind that you are providing a den, house training and keeping your puppy safe while it is alone. A good rule of thumb to assist you is to remember your puppies’ age (in months) and associate that with the number of hours your pup can “hold it.”

**3 months of age = 3 hours**

Confine your puppy in its crate for short periods (up to 1 hour). As stated above you should be sure the environment is within the normal living space of your home, and free from drafts or direct heat sources. Provide a blanket, toys and a treat. Put your puppy in the crate last thing, just before leaving. Do not make him/her wait in the crate while you get ready and walk around the home. Be sure to avoid long good byes and excited play just before you leave. Toss in a treat and a toy, shut the door and leave.

### **Long Term Confinement**

For periods longer than an hour, you will need to provide a place for your puppy to eliminate. Surround the crate with an exercise pen (playpen with no floor, for dogs) and leave the door of the crate open. This will give your puppy the option of EXITING the crate into a controlled space and eliminating on paper. It is very important to let your puppy know that eliminating in the crate is not an option and it is important for us to know that puppies cannot “hold it” for long periods.

### **Crating the adult dog**

Much of the typical problem behavior of an older puppy (over 6 months) or an adult dog is caused by feelings of insecurity when left alone. Although a crate can help with this need, gradual introduction is a must. As well as every experience with the crate being a positive and pleasant one. Remember that a dog crate is NOT intended for long hours of usage for the convenience of an absent owner.

### **How to use it.**

Place the crate in a location where the dog will definitely feel part of the human family (though still has some privacy), leave the door open and place a blanket and a toy inside. Encourage the dog to investigate by luring him inside. Toss treats such as cheese or hotdogs into the far end. Be sure to praise enthusiastically.

Continue this pattern for several days, while you are home. Encouraging your dog to enter the crate shut the door for a few minutes at a time (while people are visible or audible nearby). Do not fuss or apologize while the dog is in the crate, simply offer treats through the door and praise. Be patient and refrain from comforting words or apologies. If your dog remains quiet, reward him / her by letting them out of the crate. GOOD DOG!



Another great way to get your dog interested in the crate is to toss in a new toy or yummy bone. Shut and latch the door and wait for them to beg to get in. Open the door for them and then shut them in while they eat or chew on the treat.

Try leaving for 5 minutes (check the mail) and come back in. Do not go to the crate or pay attention to your dog, simply wait for them to be relaxed and then (after 2 minutes) let them out saying, Good dog, You did it!

Never let your dog out of the crate unless they are calm and settled down. However, do not stand in front of them saying, "No, stop it, calm down." Simply ignore the behavior and when it stops quickly go to the crate and let them out. If you get half way there and they start wiggling again, simply - stop, turn your back and wait for calm again.

After two days (a weekend) its time to go to work or try to leave the dog alone. Give your dog a chew toy, Kong or a safe bone to keep its attention and be sure to remove the collar. Try to work it out so you only have to leave for half the day and come home early. Ignore when you first return and open the crate only when the dog is calm. Take them out and again, "Good boy, you did it!"

After a few days, you can extend your day EACH day and gradually get your dog used to being alone longer.

### **Will I ever be able to get rid of the crate?**

That answer truly depends on each individual dog and your commitment to progressing towards freedom. Every dog needs a different amount of time and every dog will react differently to crate locations, size and freedom. The best way to progress is to go from the crate to a baby gated room or area and keep the crate available. Once your dog does well, alone in that new room then progress to another room and another room - so they get more and more freedom. Each time your dog "messes up" then reduce the rooms or put them back in the crate for a few days and try again.

### **Does the crate always work?**

Unfortunately no. Although most pet owners can indeed use a crate successfully, some dogs cannot or will not tolerate confinement. This reaction is not nearly as common with a young puppy (but it does happen) as with an adult dog if adopted with little or no known background, a dog which may somehow have suffered a traumatic and frightening experience while crated or an un-adoptable "senior citizen".

If, despite every effort, a dog is obviously frantic or very miserable when confined to a crate, then you must consider that to use one is indeed inhumane and can result in physical and emotional injury. Even though a crate may not always work, it is always worth a try!

If you are having problems crate training call the NHSPCA for assistance 603-772-2921 Ext. 112

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Reproduced and edited from: Nick Meyer education effort Inc., 31 Davis Hill Road, Weston, CT 06883  
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