

# Crate training your puppy

Crating a puppy is a procedure widely recommended by trainers, groomers, veterinarians, animal shelters, and behaviorists. Crating is based on the idea that dogs are denning animals. In the wild many canid species use a small cave or dug-out area to give birth to pups and for protection while sleeping or resting. However, contrary to what some sources would lead you to believe, wild canids do not spend their day in the den. Crating, while a useful tool in many situations, can be over-used and improperly used.

Using a crate as a housetraining aid has two purposes. First, it makes it easier to supervise the puppy and prevents him from having complete access to the house where he is likely to get into mischief. Second, since puppies have a natural tendency not to soil their den or sleeping area, the puppy will be unlikely to eliminate in her crate, and more likely to eliminate when she is taken outside. Problems can develop if a crate is used in ways at odds with these premises. First, young puppies can only be expected to control their bladder and bowels for several hours, NOT for an entire work day. Leaving a puppy in a crate for 8 to 10 hours is not an appropriate way to use a crate in housetraining. The puppy needs to be released from the crate and put outside when she needs to eliminate. A puppy who is forced to soil her crate as a result of being crated too long is not being treated fairly, and will be much more difficult to housetrain.

Crate training can be accomplished in several days, or may take several weeks, depending on the age, temperament, and previous experiences your puppy has had. You should keep two things in mind while training your puppy to a crate. First, the crate should always be associated with something pleasant for the puppy, and second, training should take place in a series of small steps - don't try to do too much too fast.

## **Step 1: Introducing your puppy to the crate**

Put the crate in an area of your house where you and your family spend a lot of time, such as the family room or kitchen. Put a soft sleeping blanket or towel in the crate. Bring your puppy over to the crate and talk to him in an excited, happy tone of voice. Make sure the door to the crate is securely fastened open so it won't accidentally hit your puppy and frighten him. Drop some small tidbits of food around the crate, just inside the door, and then gradually all the way inside to encourage your puppy to enter. If she doesn't go all the way in at first to get the food, that's OK. DO NOT force her to enter.

Repeat this experience until your puppy will calmly walk into the crate to obtain a piece of food. If your puppy isn't interested in food, try tossing a favorite toy in the crate instead. This process may take just a few minutes, or as long as several days.

## **Step 2: Feeding your puppy in the crate**

After your puppy has been introduced to the crate, you can begin feeding him his regular meals near the crate for a while. This will create pleasant associations with the crate and decrease any fear he has of the crate. If your puppy is readily entering the crate when you begin step 2, you can place the food dish all the way at the back of the crate. However, if your puppy is still reluctant to enter the crate, then place the dish right in front of the open door or as far inside as he will readily go without becoming fearful or anxious. Each time you feed him, place the dish a little more toward the back of the crate. Once your puppy is comfortably eating his food while standing in the crate, you can close the door while he's eating.

At first, open the door as soon as he finishes his meal, let him out, and praise him. With each succeeding feeding, leave the door closed a few minutes longer, until he is staying in the crate

without protesting for 10 minutes or so after eating. If he begins to whine to be let out, you may have increased the duration of crating too quickly. Next time, try leaving him for a shorter time. Be sure to release him from the crate when he is not whining or barking. If vocalizing results in release, the behavior will be reinforced and a problem will develop.

### **Step 3: Conditioning your puppy to the crate for longer periods**

After your puppy is eating her regular meals in the crate with no sign of fear or anxiety, you can begin to confine her there for short periods while you are home. Begin by calling her over to the crate in return for a food reward. Give her a command to enter such as "kennel up". You can encourage her to do so by pointing to the inside of the crate with a tidbit of a favorite food in your hand. After your puppy enters the crate, reward her with the tidbit and close the door. Sit quietly near the crate for 5 or 10 minutes and then go out of sight into another room for a few minutes. When you return, sit quietly again for a short time, and then release your puppy. Repeat this procedure several times a day. With each repetition, gradually increase the length of time the puppy is crated, and the length of time you are out of sight. Once your puppy will quietly remain in the crate for about 30 minutes, you can begin leaving her crated when you are gone for short periods, and/or letting her sleep there at night. It may take several days or several weeks to get to this point.

### **Step 4: Crating when left alone**

After your puppy is spending about 30 minutes in the crate without becoming anxious or afraid while you are there, you can begin leaving him crated for short periods while you are gone. Put him in the crate with your regular "kennel up" or a similar command. You will want to vary at what point you put your puppy in the crate during the process of getting ready to leave. Although he should not be crated for a long period before you leave, you can crate him anywhere from 2 to 20 minutes prior to leaving. Do not make departures emotional and prolonged, but matter-of-fact instead. Praise your puppy briefly and give him a tidbit for entering the crate, and then leave quietly. When you arrive home do not inadvertently reward your puppy for excited behavior by responding to him in an excited, enthusiastic way. Keep arrivals very low key and reserve playful, excited greeting behavior for after he has been let outside and has calmed down somewhat. Continue to crate your puppy for short periods from time to time when you are home so that he does not begin to associate crating with being left alone.

### **Step 5: Crating at night**

Follow the same procedure you have been using to encourage your puppy to enter his crate willingly. Initially, it may be a good idea (especially if you have a young puppy) to locate the crate in your bedroom or nearby in a hallway. Puppies often need to go outside to eliminate during the night, and you'll want to be able to hear your puppy when she whines to be let outside. Initially, older puppies should also be kept nearby so that crating does not become associated with social isolation. Once your puppy is sleeping comfortably through the night with her crate near you, you can begin to gradually move it to the location you prefer.

### **Whining**

If your puppy whines or cries while in the crate at night, it may be difficult to decide whether he is whining to be let out of the crate, or if he needs to be let outside to eliminate. If you follow the training procedure outlined above, your puppy should not have been reinforced by being let out of the crate when whining. Initially you can ignore the whining. Your puppy may stop if he is just testing to see if he'll be let out. Yelling at him or pounding on the crate may only increase his vocalizations. If the whining continues after you have ignored it for several minutes, you can repeat the phrase your puppy has associated with going outside to eliminate. If he responds and becomes excited, take him outside. This should be a trip with a purpose - not play time. If you are convinced that your puppy does not need to eliminate, the best response is to ignore the whining completely. Most attempts at punishing the behavior actually end up inadvertently reinforcing it because the puppy is getting attention from you.

During the process of ignoring whining, expect it to get worse before it gets better. **You cannot give in, otherwise you will have taught your puppy that he must whine loud and long to get what he wants!** If you have progressed very gradually through the training steps and have not attempted to hurry the process and cut corners, you will not be likely to encounter this problem. If the problem becomes unmanageable, you may need to restart the crate training process from the very beginning.

**A puppy should never be crated as punishment for misbehavior!**

