

Crate Training

By Diane Jarvis

Crate training is a good way to ensure a long, happy relationship with your new pooch.

First off, it is a very good idea to house train any dog you adopt. I can't tell you how many times I have been asked to help find a home for a dog, and when I ask if the dog is house trained the answer is "No, he is an outside dog."

Sadly, this makes it really difficult to find a home for owner-surrenders and is a death sentence for many shelter dogs. So, please house train your dog; he will be ready for any situation.

Crate training takes some time and effort, but is a proven way to train dogs. It is not cruel if used correctly, and many dogs consider their crate to be their own, special, safe place. Selection of the crate is more involved than you may think. They can be made of many different materials so you must decide which suits your lifestyle and usage.

Crates made of aluminum are lightweight and durable, and some are collapsible. They may have dividers to accommodate more than one dog or your dog as it grows. They are also some of the most expensive models. Wire crates provide great ventilation, are usually sturdy, and are easy to clean. They may also collapse for transport and storage. Depending on your usage they may not offer adequate protection from the elements, or enough privacy for a timid dog. A wicker crate offers a decorative answer to training and housing. While these are more attractive than plastic or metal, they can absorb odors and be difficult to clean.

Probably the most popular crate is made of plastic or fiberglass. They break down into two pieces, and have handles, vents and metal gates. Sturdy, lightweight, and easy to clean, these are ideal for house training, trips in the car, and most meet the standards for air travel.

Once you've decided on the type of crate you must find the right size. The crate must be large enough for your dog to stand up and turn around easily. If you have a puppy, buy one that will be large enough for your dog when it is fully grown – but block off the excess space so that your puppy can't eliminate at one end and retreat to the other.

The key to successful crate training is to make the crate as attractive and pleasant as possible. Place the crate in an area of your home where the family spends a lot of time so the dog won't feel isolated or punished. Put in a soft towel or blanket and a toy or chew bone, and bring your dog near the crate. Speak in a pleasant tone and encourage the dog to go into the crate with a treat.

Do not force the dog into the crate. Continue to entice him with small treats and play, and if he enters do not close the door right away. Allow him to go in and out a few times so that he doesn't feel trapped.

Feed your dog near or inside the crate to create a pleasant association. You may close the door while he is eating, but open it as soon as he finishes. Increase the time gradually until he can stay for 10 or 15 minutes without whining or barking.

At this point you may begin leaving your dog in the crate at non-meal times for short periods while you are home. It is important that during this acclimation you do not respond to whining or barking, or your dog will quickly learn how to manipulate his release.

If you are house training a puppy you'll need to take him outside frequently. Puppies under six months shouldn't stay in a crate more than three or four hours. Adult dogs, once trained, can "hold it" for eight hours.

Take care not to leave your dog crated at night, and then all day while you are at work. This can lead your dog feeling trapped and frustrated, causing other behavioral problems.

Establish good habits in the beginning and you won't have to break a bad habit later. This keeps everyone happy, and strengthens the bond you have with your dog.