

Crate Confinement: Is It a Good Choice for Your Dog?

Canine Behavior Series

The use of a crate with a dog is so common that we may automatically assume it's a good tool for all dogs. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't.

Good Reasons to Use a Crate

1. Puppies need to learn the skill of resting calmly in a crate. This will never again be as easy for the dog to adapt to as it is in puppyhood. Even if you prefer not to use a crate routinely, seriously consider doing this conditioning for your pup. We can't know what might be ahead in the years of that dog's life that will make a crate an absolute necessity.
2. Dogs who will travel by plane or go for professional grooming are going to have to be able to tolerate a crate, so crate-training is a must for these canines.
3. Emergency evacuation in time of disaster, staying with your dog in travel or rental housing, being a guest in a home that has other animals or doesn't like animals are all situations where you could suddenly need to use a crate.
4. Veterinary care and at-home nursing care require crate restriction for certain conditions. Some veterinarians have runs they can use with crate-phobic dogs in certain situations, but this isn't always workable.
5. Few people can afford the damage a dog may do left free inside the house during the destructive chewing stage, or when the dog has a severe case of separation anxiety. Even if you are wealthy enough that damage isn't an issue (and have no items of sentimental value that you couldn't bear to have chewed), the dog is at risk of chewing something that will be fatal. A crate is the logical solution if the dog can tolerate it.
6. If your dog ever has to be re-homed to a new family or your family situation changes (including a kid going off to college) or you move, the dog may experience separation anxiety and badly need the support of a crate to get through it. At these times, you want the crate to feel like a safe place to the dog as a result of good foundation training in the past. In fact, you want this at any time you use a crate with your dog!

Reasons to Not Use a Crate

First, let's note that you can still condition your dog to a crate, even if you're not going to use it routinely. It is in your dog's best interests to do so. If you're not using the crate day-to-day, it's easy to take this conditioning slowly and make it fun, fun, fun for your dog. So why not do it? A crate and the time to condition your dog for the ability to rest calmly inside it is good insurance for any dog. And remember—it's fun!

There are times and reasons that may make you decide not to crate your dog, though. Here are some of those reasons:

1. The dog has a medical condition that is worsened when the dog can't move around somewhat freely. Old dogs commonly have arthritis and some may stiffen up with close confinement. Inflamed joints on a dog of any age can react the same way. If the dog with such a condition needs to be prevented from running and jumping for medical reasons, you and your veterinarian may decide to use a small room instead of a crate or keep the dog with you on leash.
2. The dog has begun urinating or defecating in the crate. Not only is this messy, it's bad for the dog's skin and can damage the dog's instincts to keep a clean sleeping-place. This dog needs to be

out of the crate, perhaps in an exercise pen or a small room with a baby-gate across the doorway, until the dog re-establishes the habit of a clean bed and you solve any problem causing the dog not to be able to hold it during confinement.

3. The dog is afraid of the crate. This fear can be difficult to distinguish from separation anxiety, and one fear can lead to the other. Some of these dogs are difficult to manage, which is why we want to condition all puppies to be able to rest calmly in a crate. That foundation can make a huge difference later.

If you have a crate-phobic dog, you can recondition the dog's reaction to the crate, but you don't want to use the crate as a routine confinement method while doing the conditioning. That would undo the positive conditioning to the crate you're trying to establish.

4. The time the dog needs to be left alone is too long for crate confinement. Eight hours is a good top limit for crate time, even if the dog is doing great in a crate. Why risk trouble?

For pups under 7 months of age, the rule of thumb is to crate no longer than the number of hours equaling the dog's age in months plus one. When a dog has the experience of being crated too long and feeling trapped while needs go unmet, that is the perfect set up to begin fear of the crate, fear of being left alone, and other problems. So if you need to leave a dog longer than the dog can comfortably hold bladder and bowels or longer than 8 hours (whichever is less), use different confinement, such as a small room.

5. Is there any reason to crate this dog? If you have a dog who behaves wonderfully when left alone loose in the house, consider why you would crate. One reason might be that the dog is new to your home and you're not sure what the dog might do in the next few days or weeks. Better crate than sorry.

Another reason is when your 4-month-old puppy is housetrained and you think the need for a crate is over. Chances are the permanent teeth will erupt in the next few months and serious chewing such as you've not seen in this pup before will start! So don't stop crating at this age. Wait a bit to see how much of a chewer your pup is going to be. With large dogs, expect to use the crate to age 2 to 2 ½ years of age to get past the destructive chewing stage. It's not for life!

6. Does your dog have a job to do in your home? If one reason you have a dog is to deter criminals from breaking into your house or harming your family, the dog can't do this job confined to a crate. In such a case you're going to want to choose a breed, bloodline, and individual dog with a high chance of growing into an adult dog who can be trusted loose in your house (some are not likely to develop this ability, so do your research!). You're also going to need to do the right foundation work, including use of a crate to help management until the dog has learned to chew only the right items, to eliminate in the right place, etc.

Use Crates Thoughtfully

Dogs have at times had their lives saved by crates. They have also been able to handle stressful situations much more serenely because the crate has been built up in the dog's experience as a safe place. The skill of resting calmly in a crate is a life skill that can benefit almost all dogs.

There is, however, a disturbing trend for people to overuse crates with their dogs. Being able to spend several hours a day moving around the house rather than spending that same time in a crate will benefit a dog in many ways.

The dog loose in the house moderately exercises the body, which for some dogs can be all the exercise they need. Small dogs and "busy" types like herding dogs will keep going and going and going indoors, happily getting a great deal of exercise.

Dogs don't learn anything when crated, other than to accept crating—or to fear it, in certain unfortunate situations. To train your dog for the ability to be reliable free in your house, have the

dog out of the crate and with you whenever you can supervise and teach. With maturity and training, the majority of dogs will learn to behave well in the house when you're not watching as well as when you are.

Dogs need mental exercise as well as physical exercise, and being free in the house allows more mental stimulation, too. You can help determine how your dog will use this wonderful brainpower by providing toys and games (hide treats around the house when you're going to be gone, for example) and working with your dog to establish safe play habits in the house.

Ideally, good crate practices start when you plan to acquire a dog, by getting a good crate (or two, or three!), deciding where to place it (bedroom, car, possibly family room), thinking through a good schedule for your dog, buying safe toys, and otherwise being well prepared to meet your new dog's needs.

If the dog is a puppy, consider the background. A pet shop or other puppy-mill puppy will likely need alternate confinement for a while until clean instincts can kick in, so have a plan for that. Ask the breeder or foster home of any dog you're adopting about that dog's experience with crates. Be prepared for separation anxiety to kick in when you bring home a new dog. Most separation anxiety of this sort subsides with time and sensible, stable management.

A dog who has previously been fine with a crate can develop fear of it for various reasons, sometimes reasons we don't understand. Do everything you can to keep the crate a happy place that feels safe to your dog. Be prepared to get the dog out of a crate, temporarily or permanently, if the dog develops a problem with it.

The crate is not the only way to confine a dog, and some dogs don't need confinement for much of their lives other than being inside a house or a fence. The more we understand about why we're using a crate with this dog at this time, or why we should avoid a crate with this dog at least for now, the better we can manage our dogs for health and happiness.

*Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book *Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others*. Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.*

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GUIDE TO CRATE/CONFINEMENT TRAINING

Confinement training is intended to provide a comfortable bed, den, or play area for the dog, while restricting access to areas where it might housesoil, do harm to itself, or cause damage. Crate training should be considered akin to placing a young child in a playpen or crib for playtime or sleeping. Other alternatives for confinement include housing the dog in a pen, run, or dog-proofed room, where it might have more freedom to stretch out, chew, or play with its toys. If you don't provide a safe confinement area at times that you cannot supervise, your dog will wander the home unsupervised and will likely engage in destructive chewing, roam through restricted areas, eliminate in undesirable locations, and get into potentially dangerous situations.

The location and techniques used for training should be designed to keep the experience positive. For example, the dog should be encouraged to sleep, nap, or play with its chew toys in its confinement area. On the other hand, if the dog is confined at a time when it is in need of play, attention, or elimination, then escape attempts and anxiety are to be expected. If a dog's attempts at escape are ever successful, then future, more ambitious attempts to escape are likely to occur. Therefore a secure, inescapable form of confinement should be utilized.

Benefits of a crate/confinement trained dog

1. Security – a specific area that serves as a den or resting area for the dog.
2. Safety for the pet.
3. Prevents damage (chewing, investigation, elimination, etc.).
4. Aids in the training of proper chewing and elimination by preventing failure and encouraging success.
5. Traveling: accustoms the dog to confinement for traveling and boarding.
6. Improved relationship with your pet: fewer problems and therefore less discipline for the pet and less frustration/anxiety for you.

Crate training

1. A metal, collapsible crate with a tray floor or a plastic traveling crate works well, provided it is large enough for the dog to stand and turn around. Some dogs adapt quicker to a small room, run, or doggy playpen.
2. Because dogs are social animals, an ideal location for the crate is a room that the family frequents such as a kitchen, den, or bedroom, rather than an isolated laundry or furnace room. If you have observed your dog choosing a particular corner or room to take a nap, or you wish your dog to sleep in a particular location at night, then this might be the best location for the crate.
3. For the crate to remain a positive retreat, it should not be used for punishment. If social isolation (time-out) is used, consider placing the dog in a laundry room or bathroom.
4. A radio or television may help to calm the dog and may help to mask environmental noises that can trigger barking.

Puppies

1. Introduce the puppy to the crate as early in the day as possible. Place a few treats, toys, or food in the crate so that the puppy is motivated to enter voluntarily. Command training (e.g., 'Go to your kennel!') can also be useful.
2. The first confinement session should be after a period of play, exercise, and elimination (i.e., when the puppy is ready to take a nap). Place the puppy in its crate with a toy and a treat and close the door. Alternatively, if the puppy lies down to take a nap, move the puppy to the crate for the duration of the nap.
3. Leave the room but remain close enough to hear the puppy. Some degree of distress vocalization is to be expected the first few times the puppy is separated from its family members. Never reward the pet by letting it out when it cries or whines. Ignore it until the crying stops. Release the puppy when it wakes or if you need to awaken your puppy for feeding, play, or elimination (e.g., prior to your departure).

4. If crying does not subside on its own, a mild interruption may be useful. Any interruption that causes fear or anxiety must be avoided since it is not mentally healthy for the pet and could aggravate the vocalization or cause elimination in the crate. During the interruption, you should remain out of sight, so that the puppy does not learn to associate the interruption with your presence. A sharp noise, such as that provided by a shaker can containing a few coins, can be used to interrupt barking. A squirt from a water gun may also be effective. Another way to discourage barking is to use a commercial bark-activated device that produces an alarm or distracting spray when the puppy vocalizes.
5. Repeat the confinement training procedures a few more times before bedtime.
6. Prior to bedtime, the puppy should be exercised and secured in its crate for the night. Again do not go to the pet if it is crying. If the puppy cries in the middle of the night, it should be ignored or a brief interruption can be utilized (as above). Then release the puppy when it is quiet and time to get up. Puppies under four months of age may not be able to keep their crate clean for the entire night, so an early morning walk may be necessary for the first few weeks. Sometimes the best way to reduce distress vocalization is to locate the crate in the bedroom.
7. Never leave the puppy in its crate for longer than it can control itself or it may be forced to eliminate in the crate. If the pup must be left for longer than it can control elimination, a larger confinement area with paper for elimination, a puppy litterbox, or access to an elimination area outdoors by dog door will be necessary.
8. Until a puppy has been housetrained (no accidents for at least four consecutive weeks) and no longer destroys household objects in your absence, it should not be allowed out of its confinement area except under direct supervision. While the puppy is out of its confinement area, constant supervision is required so that undesirable behaviors can be interrupted and desirable behaviors can be rewarded.

The adult dog

1. The most important principles for effective crate training include locating the crate (or confinement area) in a location where the dog feels comfortable about sleeping or napping and gradually introducing the dog to confinement in as positive a manner as possible.
2. Set up the crate in the dog's feeding area or sleeping area with the door open for a few days. Place food, treats, and toys in the crate so that the dog enters the crate on its own. Once the dog is entering the crate freely, it is time to close the door.
3. Follow steps 1 to 4 in puppy training above to accustom the dog to confinement. Repeat these procedures for a few days, gradually increasing the amount of time the dog must remain quietly in the crate before it is released.
4. Finally, the dog should be left in its crate during bedtime or during departures. Try short departures first, and gradually make them longer.
5. Some dogs may adapt quicker to crate training by having the dog sleep in the crate at night.
6. If you are away from home four or more days per week, the pet should not be left in the crate for more than about four hours during the day each day when you are gone.

Crate training problems

If your dog is particularly anxious or eliminates in its crate, then it may be an indication that some part of the crate training technique needs to be revisited.

1. It may be possible that the dog is being left in its crate longer than it can control elimination. Confine the dog for a shorter time and be certain that it has eliminated prior to confinement.
2. If the crate is overly large some dogs may sleep in one end and eliminate in the other. Consider a smaller crate or a divider.
3. If your dog is anxious or attempts to escape when left in its crate, then he or she may not have been accustomed to its crate in a gradual and positive enough manner. Review the steps above to ensure that the crate is in a comfortable bedding location, that each crate introduction is positive, and that the crate is not used for punishment.
4. If the dog has previously escaped from its crate, this serves to encourage further escape attempts. Change to a more secure confinement area or ensure that the crate is inescapable. It may then be necessary to supervise the dog in its crate for a period of time to help reduce anxiety and deter further escape attempts.