

Crate Expectations

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If you have a pup, you need a crate. Frankly, one without the other is simply madness!

Did you know that Barbara Woodhouse was recommending the use of puppy crates way back in the 1970s? Her suggestion to use them for ease of house training was way ahead of its time. However, it took many more years for the average pet owner to decide that this was a useful addition to the family furniture when raising a puppy.

The virtues of crate training are many and varied. In fact, quite how new puppy owners manage without one is beyond me! Puppies have a sleep-wake cycle that is pretty intense. When they are awake, they are truly awake. They want to run, pee, poo, sniff, chew and explore – often at high speed. This relatively short period of full-on activity is, of course, a perfect time to take advantage of the pup's need for stimulation – to get him or her out and about, or to do some training – or both. All this before he falls asleep again! Then, once asleep, he's out for the count, and really needs to be left undisturbed. Of course, the fact is that even though your new pup is adorable and entrancing, there are still things that you have to get on with. Just because your puppy is 12 weeks old doesn't make the washing go away, or mean that you can stop taking the kids to school. Because life sometimes gets in the way of puppy supervision, the question is how are you going to make sure that your puppy, your home, and your sanity, remain intact during this busy phase?

The answer, of course, to those in the know, is the humble crate. A crate need not be a caged prison, destined to separate dog from family when they can't be bothered with it anymore. Nor should a crate be an excuse not to train the dog properly – after all, house training, good manners in the house and sociability with humans all need time and input.

In my house, the arrival of the crate causes great excitement for all the dogs. As soon as the crate goes up, all the dogs in the house make a bee-line for it and, will try to get in – no matter the size of the crate or how much of their bodies they can fit in through the open door! In fact it's not unusual to find Windsor, my huge Golden retriever, with just his head inside the crate, sleeping blissfully! My dogs view the crate as a luxury, a retreat. Somewhere where only they can fit and where others are forced to sit on the outside looking in. Of course, add food to this equation, and the appeal of the crate goes up even further. Then, other dogs have to sit on the outside looking in at luxury, while the inhabitant slowly eats his delicious morsels in a teasing fashion. No wonder they all want in on the crate time-share agreement!

There is little doubt that crate training helps with all kinds of average puppy needs. It prevents your little darling chewing through electric cables while your back is turned, it can help with house training (dogs rarely want to toilet in their bed area) and it can help protect the pup from over-pestering by children or other dogs.

In my opinion, it also helps to prevent (or even resolve) separation issues in dogs that are prone to becoming over-attached to their owner. If you have a dog that would like to live as your shadow – following you from room to room, and crying outside the bathroom door, then encouraging him to use the crate as a safety area - away from you for short periods - is especially useful for teaching him that he really can cope on his own. Of course, nothing could be more important for rescue dogs, who can be

inclined to over-bond with their new owners almost overnight, causing problems which are as distressing as they are impractical.

There is also another reason why it is so useful to have trained your puppy to use a crate willingly, which, until now, I have rarely considered. Having undergone a major hip operation at the age of just six months, my new little dog has had to be confined to cage rest for much of the time since leaving the vet. This has been tough enough, but at least he hasn't resented the confinement nearly as much as he would if he hadn't already had some good experience of resting and eating in the crate already.

How much is too much?

Medical conditions aside, the use of a crate should be very much a comfort zone for your dog, and not a place of solitary confinement. For this reason, the rule of thumb has to be that the crate is used for sleeping (short periods during the day and then the whole night) and then during the day when the puppy simply cannot be supervised, up to a maximum of two hours.

I know that in other countries it is not unusual for owners to crate their dog for several hours of the day. This can be a recipe for disaster, leading to worse behaviour when the dog is 'freed' simply as a result of pent-up frustration and energy. Frankly speaking, of course the dog is going to launch itself like a missile into anything and everything it can, just to gain some relief from its boring existence.

The amount of time that you should leave your dog in a crate at one stretch is a matter not only for conscience, but also practicality. If you own a Chihuahua, then time spent in a roomy and well-appointed crate is a bit like me enjoying time in a hotel room during the day. It's luxurious, and I'm happy to be in there, but I would go stir crazy if I couldn't get out and about for fresh air and stimulation after a couple of hours. However, put me there for the night, and I would be distinctly grumpy if someone tried to disturb my sleep. On the other hand, if you own an Irish Wolfhound, just finding a crate big enough for your dog will be a major challenge! All dogs should be able to stand up, turn around and stretch out comfortably in a crate. It should be filled with comfy bedding (that you aren't attached to – in case of chewing incidents) and you should provide safe toys or chews and water (clever non-spill attachments are now available).

All in all, crates should be regarded as the dog training sanity-saver of the last few decades. Just like a good wine, if they are abused they can cause horrible consequences: used responsibly they can bring contentment and relief – for both humans and dogs.

Choose to use!

How to train your puppy to willingly go in the crate.

- 1. Make the crate a place the pup will want to be. Make it cosy and comfortable. Put it somewhere out of drafts and the main traffic of the house, but not isolated from the family.**
- 2. Make up your pup's dinner. Let your pup see it and smell it, then put the dish inside the crate, and close the door, with your puppy on the *outside*!**
- 3. After a few seconds, open the crate door. Your puppy should shoot in, keen to eat the food – his desire heightened by a little frustration. Close the door and allow him to eat in peace, then let him out and take him out to the toilet.**
- 4. Most pups only need to repeat this process three or four times before they start to make wonderful associations with the crate.**