

A PET OWNER'S GUIDE TO THE DOG CRATE

By Nicki Meyer

From OFF – LEAD, March 1986

Far too many potentially good pets are misunderstood, unfairly punished, isolated, abused, or simply “gotten rid of” by otherwise kind and well-meaning owners who are unable to prevent, control, or live with the common “problem” behavior of puppies and young adult dogs. The correct use of dog crate could give many of these innocent animals the chance they need, and deserve, to spend their lives as the appreciated pet of a satisfied owner.

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 type of dog. Constructed of wire, wood, metal, or molded fiberglass/plastic, its purpose is to provide guaranteed confinement for reasons of security, safety, house breaking, protection of household foods, travel, illness, or just general control.

The dog crate has long been accepted, trusted, and taken for granted by dog show exhibitors, obedience and field trial competitors, trainers, breeders, groomers, veterinarians, and anyone else who handles dogs regularly. Individual pet owners, however, usually reject the idea of using a crate because they consider such enforced close confinement unfair, and even harmful to the dog.

CRUELTY – OR KINDNESS?

As The Pet Owner Sees It: “It’s like a jail – it’s cruel – I’d never put MY dog in a cage like that!” If this is your first reaction to using a crate, you are a very typical pet owner. As a reasoning human being, you really value your freedom; and since you consider your pet an extension of the human family, it’s only natural to feel that closing him in a crate would be mean and inhumane, would probably cause him to resent and even to hate you, and might well result in psychological damage.

BUT – your are not a dog!

As The Dog Sees It: “I love having a room/house of my very own; it’s my private special place, my ‘security blanket,’ and the closed door really doesn’t bother me”. If your dog could talk, this is how he might well express his reaction to using a crate! He would tell you that the crate helps to satisfy the “den instinct” inherited from his den dwelling ancestors and relatives, and that he is not afraid or frustrated when closed in. He would further admit that he is actually much happier and more secure having his life controlled and structured by human beings – and would far rather be prevented from causing trouble than be punished for it later.

SO . . .to you it may be a “cage” to him, it’s “home”.

WHY USE A CRATE?

A dog crate, correctly and humanely used, can have many advantages for both you and your pet. With the help of a crate:

YOU:

Can enjoy complete peace of mind when leaving your dog home alone, knowing that nothing can be soiled or destroyed and that he is comfortable, protected, and not developing any bad habits.

Can housebreak your dog more quickly by using the close confinement to encourage control, establish a regular routine for outdoor elimination, and to prevent "accidents" at night or when left alone.

Can effectively confine your dog at times when he may be underfoot (meals, family activities), unwelcome (guests, workmen etc.), over-excited or bothered by too much confusion or too many children, or ill.

Can travel with your dog without risk of the driver being dangerously distracted or the dog getting loose and hopelessly lost, and with the assurance that he can easily adapt to any strange surroundings as long as he has his familiar "security blanket" along.

YOUR DOG:

Can enjoy the privacy and security of a "den" of his own to which he can retreat when tired, stressed or ill.

Can avoid much of the fear / confusion / punishment caused by your reaction to problem behavior.

Can more easily learn to control his bowels and to associate elimination only with the outdoors or other designated location.

Can be spared the loneliness and frustration of having to be isolated (basement, garage, outside) from comfortable indoor surroundings when being restricted or left alone.

Can be conveniently included in family outings, visits, and trips instead of being left behind alone at home or in a boarding kennel.

You want to enjoy your pet and be pleased with his behavior. Your dog wants little more from life than to please you. A dog crate can help to make your relationship what each of you wants and needs it to be.

USE – BUT DON'T ABUSE

The use of a dog crate is NOT recommended for a dog, which must be frequently or regularly left alone for extended periods of time, such as all or much of the day while the owner is away at work, school etc. If it is attempted, the dog must be well exercised both before and after crating, given lots of personal positive attention, and be allowed complete freedom at night (including sleeping near his owner.) His crate must be large enough to permit him comfortably to stretch out fully on his side and to feel that he has freedom of movement; it must also be equipped with a clip-on dish for water.

In the case of a puppy, the crate must be used strictly as a “play-pen” for general confinement, having plenty of space for a cozy box for sleeping at one end and papers for elimination at the other, with clip-on dishes of water and for dry food. Although a puppy can be raised in this manner, the limited human supervision may result in his being poorly adjusted socially and difficult to housebreak and to train in general.

Crate or no crate, any dog constantly denied the human companionship and attention it craves is going to be a lonely pet and may still find ways to express it.

WHAT KIND OF CRATE IS BEST?

The most practical dog crate for use by the pet owner is the collapsible wire mesh type, available in a wide variety of sizes. Lightweight and easily handled, it allows total ventilation and permits the dog to see everything going on around him. A wooden, metal, or fiberglass/plastic airline crate will certainly also serve the purpose, but it restricts air and vision, is less convenient to handle and transport, and has a limited size selection.

WHAT SIZE SHOULD A CRATE BE?

A crate should always be large enough to permit any age dog to stretch out flat on his side without being cramped and to sit up without being cramped and to sit up without hitting his head on the top. While the adult size of a pure bred puppy is fairly easy to predict, that of a mixed breed must be established 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, then add about 12” for anticipated rapid growth. If a small crate is unavailable for temporary use, reduce the space of an adult size one (width can serve for length if the crate is large) with a reversed carton or a moveable/removable partition made of wire, wood, or Masonite. Remember that a crate too large for a young puppy defeats its purpose of providing security and promoting bowel control, so its space should always be limited in the beginning, except when being used as an over-all pen (see “Use – But Don’t Abuse” section.)

WHERE CAN I GET ONE?

New crates can be purchased in retail pet shops and discount pet food/supplies outlets, through large catalog sales firms (such as Sears), at larger dog shows, from dog equipment catalogs, or from a crate manufacturer; prices depend on size, quality, and make. Most brands include a removable metal pan/tray/floor and some can be specially ordered with the door on the side instead of the end. The less expensive brands are quite adequate for most family pets, although those made of non-plated/treated wire may discolor the coat of a light colored dog. A used crate can often be borrowed, or found at a tag/garage/yard/rummage sale at a bargain price.

Even the most expensive dog crate, however, is a “bargain” when compared to the cost of repairing or replacing a sofa, chair, woodwork, wallpaper, or carpeting!

WHERE SHOULD I PUT IT?

Since one of the main reasons for using a crate is to confine a dog without making him feel isolated or banished, it should be placed in, or as close as possible to, a “people” area, kitchen, family room etc. To provide an even greater sense of den security and privacy, it should be put in a corner and /or have the sides and back loosely draped with a sheet, large towel, or light blanket which can easily be adjusted for desired visibility or air. The top of the crate, when covered with a piece of plywood or masonite, can also serve as 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 décor as it proves much it can help the dog to remain a welcome addition to the household!

CRATING THE PUPPY

A young puppy (8 – 16 weeks) should normally have no problem accepting a crate as his “own place”. Any complaining 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 him to adapt more easily and quickly to his new world.

HOW TO USE IT:

Place the crate in a “people” area, the kitchen, if possible. For bedding, use an old towel or piece of a blanket that can be washed (should he have an accident) and some freshly worn unlaundered article of your clothing such as a tee shirt, or old shirt, sweater etc. Avoid putting newspaper in or under the crate, since its odor may encourage elimination; corrugated cardboard is better if there is no floor pan. A puppy need not be fed in the crate and will only upset a dish of water.

Make it very clear to children that the crate is NOT a playhouse for the, 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 become overprotective of it.

Establish a “crate routine” immediately, closing the puppy in it at regular intervals during the day (his own chosen nap times will guide you) and whenever he must be left alone for up to 3 hours. Give him a chew toy for distraction and be sure to remove collar and tags, which could become caught in an opening. In the beginning during the night it may be necessary to place the crate, with the door left open and newspapers nearby, in a small enclosed area (bathroom, laundry room, hallway) until the puppy has become well adjusted to his new life and control his bowels for a longer period of time.

Even if things do not go too smoothly at first - **DON'T WEAKEN, DON'T WORRY**; be consistent, be firm, and be very aware that you are doing your pet a real favor by preventing him from getting into trouble while left alone.

Increase the space inside the crate as the puppy grows so that he remains comfortable. If you do not choose, or are not able to use a crate permanently, plan to use it for at least 5 or 6 months or until the dog is well past the teething phase – then start leaving the crate door open at night, when someone is at home during the day, or when he is briefly left alone. If all goes well for a week or two, and the dog seems reliable when left alone, remove the crate itself and leave the bedding in the same spot; although he will probably miss the crate enclosure, his habit of good behavior should continue. Should any problem behavior occur at a future time, however, the decision whether or not to use a crate longer, or perhaps permanently, will have been made for you!

Even after a long period without a crate, a dog that has been raised in one will readily accept it again should the need arise for travel, illness, behavior etc, and may really welcome its return.

CRATING THE ADULT DOG

Much of the usual problem behavior of an older puppy (over 6 months) or an adult dog is caused by the lack of a feeling of security when left alone. Although a crate can fulfill this need, and hence hopefully solve the problems, it must still be introduced gradually, with every possible effort made to be sure that the dog's first association with it is very positive and pleasant.

HOW TO USE IT:

If possible, buy, borrow or rent a crate of adequate size. Place it in a location where the dog will definitely feel part of the human family (though still have some privacy), secure the door open so that it can't unexpectedly shut and frighten him, and do not put in any bedding. Encourage the dog to investigate this new object thoroughly, luring him inside by tossing "special" tidbits (cheese, liver, hot dog etc. which are even more tempting than regular dog treats) into the far end, then letting him turn and come back out – praising him enthusiastically. When he begins to enter the crate confidently, place his bedding and something of yours or a towel you have slept with inside and start coaxing him to lie down and relax, still using food if necessary. Continue this pattern for several days, encouraging him to use the crate as much as possible and shutting the door briefly while you sit beside him or there are people visible and /or audible nearby. Do not hesitate, however, to meet modest resistance with consistent firmness and authority so that the dog is clearly aware of the behavior you desire.

As soon as you feel confident that the dog will remain quietly in the closed crate (which could be from the beginning!), you may safely leave him alone. Give him a chew toy or a safe bone to absorb his attention and be sure that he has nothing around his neck, which might become caught. If you are still uncertain or anxious, leave him at first for only a brief period (½ to 1 hour) until he has proved that he will not resist the confinement. Once he has accepted the crate as his bed and own "special place" your pet can stop being a problem and start being a pleasure! In due time it may even be possible to wean him gradually off the crate without his resuming any problem behavior.

DOES THE CRATE ALWAYS WORK?

Unfortunately, no. Although most pet owners can indeed use a crate successfully, there are always those animals, which simply can or will not tolerate this form of confinement. This reaction is not nearly as common with a young puppy (but it does happen!) as with an adult dog, especially an “adoptee” of unknown background, a dog, which may somehow have suffered a traumatic frightening experience while crated, or an inadaptable “senior citizen”. Some purebred breeds also seem to have a special aversion to crates. In some cases, a dog will use a crate readily as long as the door remains open, but will object violently the moment it is closed and / or he is left alone. It should be stressed here, however, that these reactions definitely represent the exception rather than the rule, and that most average pet dogs can successfully train to use a crate.

If, despite every effort at positive conditioning and real firmness, a dog is obviously frantic or totally miserable when confined to a crate, forcing him to use one is indeed inhumane and can result in real physical injury should he attempt to chew his way out.

Even though a crate may not always work it IS always worth a try – because when it DOES prevent or solve problem behavior it is truly the “best friend” you and your dog could ever have.

AUTHOR CREDIT: This material has been furnished and prepared by The Nicki Meyer Educational Effort of Weston, CT. and is based on information and experience gained by Mrs. Meyer during the many years that she has provided a dog crate information and rental service for pet owners in her area.