

Crates Are Great!

(Excerpt from ***PUPPY KISSES ARE GOOD FOR THE SOUL***)

by Howard Weinstein

Call it a crate or a kennel. But crate-training is the single easiest way to housebreak your puppy and keep him out of trouble. Used properly, a crate is not a prison. If you start right away -- and the *right way* -- most puppies can quickly learn to like their crates. With a little effort, you can teach your puppy to regard his crate as "home."



Why does crate training work?

Good question. Simple answer: by instinct, dogs are den animals. Wild canines tend to use very small, snug burrows for the birth and raising of their babies. So dog-brains are wired to be comfortable in small, dark, enclosed spaces. My own Welsh Corgis love to squeeze under couches and beds. They barely fit -- but that's where they go when they want some quiet time to themselves.

From the time they're very young, pups prefer not to soil the area where they eat and sleep. So using a properly-sized crate encourages puppies to become housebroken quickly and easily.

What size should a crate be?

When it comes to crates, *size does matter!* Common mistake: buying a crate that's too big. *People* generally prefer big, open and airy. *Dogs* prefer small, dark and cozy. A crate only needs to be big enough for your pup to walk in without crouching or ducking his head; to turn around in (and pups can turn in a very small area); and to lie down. Given more space, many dogs will sleep stretched out. With less space, they'll sleep comfortably curled up in a little ball.

A correct-size crate helps in potty-training, by giving a pup motivation to avoid going to the bathroom where he sleeps (and eats -- more on that later). If a crate is too big, a puppy won't think twice about eliminating at one end and curling up at the other.

Also, if a puppy has lots of room to move around, this extra motion is going to speed up his digestive system, and he'll need to go to the bathroom at shorter intervals.

Many folks with large-breed puppies get a crate big enough to accommodate the grown-up version of their baby. But that means the crate may be too big for the not-yet-housebroken new arrival. There are two solutions to this problem:

- ◆ **Buy a smaller "starter" crate to use during the crucial early months when potty training is paramount;**

- ◆ **Or figure out how to make the huge crate smaller, possibly by using a large plastic storage bin (bottom out) to fill the rear of the crate and create a wall, thus trimming the size of the space to be filled by your puppy. Some crates come with an adjustable partition.**

Should we get a metal crate or a plastic one?

If people ask before they buy a crate, I suggest getting the molded-plastic, travel-style item rather than the metal cage-type, for several reasons. Plastic crates come in a larger variety of sizes. They're much less expensive (so buying two to accommodate your growing pup isn't an economic hardship).

They're easier to take apart and clean. They're much lighter, so they're easier to move around the house, as needed. They fit more easily into cars and other vehicles, enabling you to keep your dog safe when traveling. And they're much more den-like – smaller, darker, cozier – factors which make puppies more comfortable when inside.

But if you already have a metal crate, do what you can to make sure it's the proper size for your puppy. To make it more cozy, you can drape an old blanket or large towel over the top and sides, leaving some open space near the floor to allow for air circulation.

What should I use a crate for?

This is where your puppy will sleep, nap, chew and eat. Used properly, a crate is a combination crib and playpen -- items without which parents would never survive the infancy and toddlerhood of their human kids!

The crate is where your puppy can feel safe and secure -- and where you know he can't get into trouble during those times when you can't supervise him.

Feed your pup his meals in his crate. Since most dogs love eating, this will help your pup build a positive association with his crate from the day you bring him home. Just slide the dish to the rear of the crate, so your pup has to go in to chow down. You don't have to close the door. Don't leave uneaten food. Remove the dish after a maximum of 20 minutes. If he doesn't eat it all, he'll be hungry for the next meal.

How can I *not* feel guilty about putting my puppy in a crate?

By remembering that puppies don't mind being in crates, as long as you make sure they have ample opportunity to get out, go to the bathroom, and get needed exercise through walks and playtime with you. When it's time to put your pup in his "den," give him lots of praise and a little tidbit-treat. If you have a positive attitude toward the crate, so will your dog.

How long can I keep my puppy in a crate?

For young pups, about one hour per month of age, plus up to an hour. So a 3-month old puppy should be able to go up to 4 hours in a crate -- assuming, of course, that he's had a chance to go potty before you put him in, and that there's no water or food in the crate with him. Obviously, if he's eating and drinking while in his crate, what goes in must come out.

How long should we use a crate?

Dogs are puppies until around 2 years of age. For the first year of your pup's life, it's probably safer to crate him whenever you have to leave him home alone. Even after he's housebroken, he may be prone to destructive chewing of all sorts of household items -- including the living room sofa!

This sort of thing lands many young dogs in animal shelters -- but it's not the dogs' fault. It's

ours, for giving them the chance to get into trouble. Crating a pup eliminates the possibility of major misbehavior.

My two Corgis are no longer puppies, but they still eat in their crates (with the doors open). This makes it less likely one will try to munch on the other's food. They also travel safely inside their crates. And when we visit friends or relatives, we may use the crates for short periods of time when we can't watch our dogs, to keep them from tasting "forbidden fruit" in an unfamiliar environment.

How can I teach my dog to enter his crate on command?

This can be both easy and fun. First, decide what everyone in your household will call the crate. We decided "room" was friendlier than "crate." Then, just before mealtime, take 10 pieces of your pup's dry kibble. Place one nugget 2 inches inside the crate, so all he has to do to get it is stick his head in. Encourage your puppy to go get the treat by saying: "Go into your room!" If he does, reward him with lots of praise.

Repeat the game, but put the next piece a little further inside. Each time your pup gets the treat, praise him. Your goal is to get to the point where you can toss a food-nugget all the way to the back of the crate, and your pup will dive in after it, on the command "Go into your room!"

Some pups hesitate. If yours isn't eager to follow the food, gently pick him up and place him in the crate, making sure to repeat the command phrase, along with generous praise. But don't force him in if he kicks and screams. Just keep playing this game, possibly using food morsels more mouth-watering (tiny pieces of a hot dog or American cheese might do the trick).

Playing this game when your pup is hungry increases the chance of success.

Repeat this game 2 or more times a day for a week or so. Chances are, you'll have your pup going after those food nuggets in a few days. Once you do, you're going to *change the rules*.

Instead of using the food as a *lure* to get him to go into his crate, you're going to start asking him to go in first -- then giving him the treat as a *reward*. The first few times, your pup may balk. He's thinking: "Hey, that's not how the game goes!" If he does, you'll gently pick him up, place him inside while saying the command phrase, then immediately give him the reward and praise -- even though the only reason he went in was because you put him in. In a short time, most pups understand and happily play by the new rules. After a while, you can make the treat-rewards random and occasional -- and soon eliminate them altogether.

In a few short days, you'll be able to amaze your friends and relatives by showing them how your pup goes into his "room" just because you ask him to. Don't forget to say thank you and give him lots of praise when he does.

What about special treats?

Another great way to get your pup to love his crate: once or twice a day, give him a special treat or food-bearing toy that he only gets in his crate. It could be a favorite chew toy. Or a rubber *Kong* toy or hollow sterilized "marrow" bone with some peanut butter stuffed in it. Or a peeled, ready-to-eat baby carrot. Best if it's something that keeps him busy for a while.

Should I put a bed or blanket in his crate?

Probably not, because what puppies usually do with bedding is chew it up, pee on it, or both. Peeing on bedding allows a pup to push it off to the side and ignore it. And it may be days before you know that your puppy is doing this. Puppies are usually perfectly comfortable lying on the cool crate floor. Certainly don't buy an expensive bed for a puppy. If you want to put something soft in, a piece of an old blanket or towel will do.

Should I put toys in with him?

Yes! A couple of safe and sturdy chew toys will help keep him busy and happy. Don't put plush toys in the crate; sharp teeth can easily shred these, enabling a pup to swallow and possibly choke on stuffing and squeakers.

What about his water dish?

In general, don't leave water in the crate. If your pup drinks, he's going to have to pee in there. Also, puppies tend to play in and tip over water dishes, leaving a wet crate and soaked dog. If your pup is going to be crated for four hours or more, look in the bird department of the pet store for something called a "Coop Cup." This is a metal bracket that attaches to the crate door; the bracket holds a small stainless-steel bowl up off the crate floor. You can put one or two ice cubes in the bowl. As the ice melts slowly, your pup can sip a little water if he needs to, without drinking enough to force him to urinate in his crate.

What if I can't make it home in time to walk my crated puppy on a fair & reasonable schedule?

Then you need to make alternate arrangements. Maybe there's a neighbor (adult or responsible older child) you'd trust with a house key and the job of walking your pup on schedule. Offer to pay something. Most areas are also served by professional dog-walking services. If you need such a service, check with your vet's office for recommendations, or check the Yellow Pages.

What if my puppy cries at night when he's put in his crate?

It's natural for a new pup to feel lonely the first few nights he's away from his mom and siblings. You can help him get over this by *not* doing what many people do: putting the pup and crate in the basement or garage or kitchen, far away from any other living thing.

Instead, for at least the first few nights, put the crate within arm's reach of your bed. Play with your pup before bedtime to tire him out, walk him so he can go potty, then put him in the crate when you're ready for bed yourself. If he fusses, *don't* sweet-talk him with a soothing voice. Pups interpret that as praise for crying. But don't *yell* at him -- remember, he's just a lonely baby.

The instant he starts crying, reach over, tap the side or top of the crate, and say "*No -- Shhh -- Quiet*" in a neutral voice. Then, if he's quiet for even a second or two, quietly praise him and tell him "*Bedtime -- quiet. Good puppy.*" Repeat this as often as you need to, until he falls asleep.

During the night, he can hear you and smell you. He'll know you're close by. And he'll be less lonely.

Keep in mind that puppies less than 4 months old may not be able to sleep through the night without needing to go potty. If your pup fusses in the middle of the night, get up, put his leash on and take him outside. Encourage him to go the bathroom. If he does, praise him quietly -- and put him right back to bed in his crate. Don't stop to play with him. On the other hand, if you take him out and he doesn't go (after giving him a few minutes in his special "potty area"), he goes right back to bed.

Yes, having him sleeping near your bed means you'll hear every sound he makes. But that's the idea. If he needs to go to the bathroom, and he's at the other end of the house, you're going to wake up to a messy crate and messy pup. Personally, I'd much rather get up for five minutes in the middle of the night than spend an hour the next morning cleaning both crate and dog.

Most puppies can quickly learn to go to bed in their crates quietly. And as they get older, they'll be able to sleep through the night. As time passes, you can decide if you want your dog to continue to sleep in your bedroom, or move the crate elsewhere.

EXTRA TIPS:

Never use a crate as punishment

If your pup's been naughty and you need a break -- and he needs a "time-out" -- make sure you're both calm when you crate him. Give him praise and maybe even a tidbit-treat when you shut that door.

Start short

When you bring your pup home, get him accustomed to crating by putting him in for short periods of time while you're still home to correct him if he cries, and to praise him when he's quiet. Getting him used to the crate while you're home will keep him from associating the crate with being left home alone.

Only quiet dogs come out

Try to avoid letting your pup out of his crate when he's crying. If you do, you'll be teaching him he can get what he wants simply by making a fuss. An *exception* to this is if you think he's got to go potty -- *NOW!* If that's the case, then be ready to get his leash on and whisk him outside to his potty area. If he indeed relieves himself, great! Praise him -- and then put him right back into the crate if that's where you need him to be at that moment.

Collar safety

Make sure your pup's collar fits well (no more than 2-3 fingers should fit under it). Make sure there's nothing in the crate for him to catch his collar on. If there is, remove the collar when he's crated.

Don't force the issue

Some pups may have had negative experiences with crates before they come to live with us. If your pup freaks out at the sight of a crate, don't force him into it. Consult a trainer.