



Canine Companions Rescue Center

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Crate and House Training

Imagine handing car keys and your car to your seven year old and expecting nothing bad to happen. Pretty hard, right? Why, then, do we imagine we can leave a puppy loose and unsupervised in our house and expect nothing bad to happen? The same logic applies. We prevent our children from driving until they can be responsible and have had lessons, so it stands to reason that we should prevent our puppies from soiling the house and chewing everything in site by confining them until they learn the rules and mature enough to be trustworthy. A crate is the simplest and most humane way to handle this with our dogs.

Having a crate allows you to prevent bad habits from forming. If a dog never chews a shoe during the first year of his life the odds are pretty good that it won't occur to him to do it when given the opportunity at a later age. However, if they develop a habit of chewing shoes while young, they will be more likely to always see a shoe as a potential toy. Diligence on your part for a relatively short time when you first bring a dog home promises years of problem free living with your dog, but if a bad habit is allowed to form you might spend years battling it.

House training is made especially easy with the use of a crate. Dogs are born with the instinct to keep their den clean so confining a dog in a crate prevents the dog from relieving himself until you take him outside. Please see the hand out on house training for more in-depth information on the subject.

The crate is not only a good way to keep your dog and your belongings safe, but it helps promote a better bond with your dog. It's hard to bond with a dog who has shredded your new leather couch! Prevent things like that from happening so you can focus on forming a positive relationship. When you feel your dog is behaving well in the house you can try giving him short periods of unsupervised house freedom. Extend the time if all goes well, and eventually you can eliminate the crate if you choose. You might just find that your dog will object, though. Many dogs prefer to sleep in their crate!

Hopefully we've convinced you that the crate is a good thing. If you're ready to give crate training a try we recommend the following:

- Make sure the crate is the proper size, which means your dog can stand and turn around comfortably. For purposes of house training you don't want a lot of extra space. If introduced and used properly the crate will become a den for your dog, a place where he feels safe and can get away from things if he chooses. To make sure that happens, you never want to use the crate as punishment. A dog who tends to chew the couch can be crated as a preventative when you can't supervise him, but a dog who has just chewed up the couch should not be placed in the crate for hours as a form of punishment.
- Dogs are social animals and therefore it is cruel to isolate them. For this reason we recommend an open wire crate placed in a well trafficked area of the house. A baby gate in the doorway of a small room is an acceptable alternative if the room is dog-proofed. A closed room, basement, or garage is not a good idea because it is unsafe and can contribute to separation anxiety.

- Start by telling him “kennel” or “go to bed” and toss a small treat in the crate. At first he should follow the treat in, but if you always give him a treat for going in he’ll start to anticipate it and he’ll go in and wait for it when you give the command. The first several times you should just leave the crate open so he can come and go as he pleases. After awhile you can shut the door briefly. A toy could also be put in to distract him from the fact that you’re closing the door. As time goes on, toys can also help alleviate boredom if he’s in there for awhile. Do this while you’re at home for short periods of time and then when you actually have to leave your dog will be more likely to be calm.
- Always feed your dog in his crate. As he begins to anticipate this he’ll start diving into the crate when he sees you pick up his dish. It is also another positive association - good things happen in the crate!
- Be careful not to reward your dog as he gets out of the crate. This might make him start to bark or dig to get out so he can get treats. Also, completely ignore any nuisance barking. It might take awhile, but your dog will learn that expending calories on barking does no good when he’s in there.
- Don’t make a big deal about putting him in or taking him out. It should be a very matter-of-fact process. Making a production of it will likely stress the dog and may contribute to the formation of separation anxiety.

If all goes well your dog will become comfortable and calm in his crate in a relatively short time and you can rest peacefully in the knowledge that your dog and your house and both safe.

House training can be a problem with puppies and older dogs alike. Here are some ideas to make the process go as smoothly as possible with any new canine addition to your household:

- Provide an area of confinement. Ideally this would be a crate, but any small area where the dog will not be isolated but will be prevented from doing harm to itself or anything else will suffice (i.e. a baby gate in the doorway of a mud room or laundry room with all clothing and chemicals out of reach). Keep in mind it should be large enough for the dog to stand and turn around, but too large an area may prolong the process of house training.
- Until you know your dog is housetrained, leave him in the crate any time you are not directly supervising him.
- Scheduled feedings make it easier for you to predict when your dog needs to go out.
- Take puppies outside every hour or so to relieve themselves (older dogs every couple of hours). Praise heavily if they do, then you can take them in and give them some supervised house freedom. If they don’t relieve themselves you should play outside for awhile or return the dog to the crate.
- After an hour or so of house freedom (less with puppies) you should make one last trip outside then return the dog to the crate.
- Repeat the play-relieve-crate-relieve pattern throughout the day, every day, for several days to a few weeks. At some point you can begin to prolong the dog’s time out of the crate so you can watch to see if the dog will go toward the door when he needs to go out. If he does, immediately praise him and take him out. Don’t wait for him to bark or paw the door at first.

- As the habit to go outside to relieve himself becomes stronger, you can allow your dog more and more supervised house freedom. Unsupervised house freedom should only happen when you are certain your dog is reliably house trained and also reliable about not chewing inappropriate objects etc.
- At some point your dog should feel so strongly about going outside to relieve himself that he will indicate by pawing or barking at the door. If this doesn't happen you can teach your dog to indicate. Call us if you need help with this.
- Dogs can be creatures of habit so prevention is a huge part of house training your dog. If they never have an opportunity to make a mistake, the habit of relieving themselves in the house can be avoided all together and the proper habit of going outside will be very strong. If they do have an accident you have to make sure you remove all scent from the floor or they will be more likely to go in that spot again.
- Timing is also very important. A dog will only associate a reinforcement (positive or negative) with what is on their mind at the time. If you catch them in the act of having an accident, scoop them up and tell them something like "No potty!" as you rush them outside. If they finish up out there be sure to praise them, preferably while they're in the act and it's likely to be on their mind. Before long they should figure out that going inside is not good, but going outside is. If you find the accident after the fact, even just a few seconds, it's too late to do anything about it.
- Dogs are born with the instinct to keep their "den" clean and this is part of what makes it possible to house train them. Never rub your dog's nose in his urine or fecal matter or leave him in a crate that has been soiled because it may break down that instinct and make house training extremely difficult. Paper training may also send a confusing message so we recommend teaching them to go outside from the start. Also, be careful what you put in the crate with your puppy. A towel might seem like a nice soft bed, but it also might soak up urine and allow your dog to soil his crate but still feel clean. This can really prolong the house training process.
- Once your dog learns not to relieve himself in the living room it doesn't necessarily mean he won't go in the kitchen. If your dog is making mistakes, it's because you haven't been clear enough about all the rules yet. Be patient but persistent and your dog will learn.
- If you believe you are doing everything right and your dog still isn't getting it, you might be dealing with a medical issue and a talk with your vet is in order.
- Be very clear and consistent for just a couple of weeks you will enjoy many years of accident free living. Good luck!