

Island Animal Hospital

Dog Behavior and Training – Crate Training – Positive Confinement – Why to Crate Train

Why might my dog need to be confined?

Dogs are highly social animals that make wonderful pets. They can be effective as watchdogs, are excellent companions for play and exercise, and are sources of affection and comfort.

However, with the lifestyle and schedule of the majority of families, dogs must learn to spend a portion of the day at home, while their human family is away at school, work, shopping, or engaging in recreational activities. During those times when you are away and unavailable to supervise, the pet may still feel the need to chew, play, explore, eat, or eliminate. These behaviors can be very distressing to owners and damaging to the home. Confining your dog to a play area with its toys is akin to putting a young child in its playpen; while teaching your dog to relax and sleep in its crate or bed would be similar to putting your baby in its crib when its time for bedtime or a nap. Crate training may also be essential for plane travel or for housing your dog when visiting friends or family or vacationing with your dog.



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How else can this misbehavior be prevented?

Preventing inappropriate behaviors when you are absent involves both scheduling and prevention. Scheduling means ensuring that the pet has had the opportunity to play, eat, and eliminate before you leave it in its confinement area or crate. By maintaining a regular daily routine and timing your confinement to when your pet would normally be napping or playing with its toys, there should be minimal resistance to confinement. In addition, these alone times should be scheduled for the times of day when you would normally be working or otherwise occupied. Prevention involves confining your dog to an area where it is secure, safe, and comfortable so that it can do no damage to your possessions or soil in undesirable areas.

What are my options for confinement?

Depending on the structure of your home, it may be possible to confine your dog to a limited portion of your home, by closing a few doors or putting up some child gates or barricades. The dog can then be allowed access to the remaining areas of the house. Another option is to use avoidance devices that keep the pet away from selected areas (see Behavior Management Products). If dog-proofing is not possible when you have to leave your dog unsupervised, you might need to confine your dog to a single room, pen, or crate. This smaller confinement area provides safety for the dog and protection of the home from damage. It also provides a means of teaching where and what to chew (i.e., it can only chew what you

provide in the crate) as long as you properly supervise when out of confinement. Finally, it helps teach the dog where and when to eliminate, since most dogs will not soil their crates and you can teach them the appropriate places to eliminate when you are available to supervise. Training should always focus on setting up to ensure and reward success rather than trying to punish behaviors such as exploration, scavenging and elimination that might be normal but undesirable, behaviors.

Isn't crate training cruel?

Crate training is neither cruel nor unfair. On the contrary, leaving the dog unsupervised to wander, investigate, destroy, and perhaps injure itself is far more inhumane than confinement. Ensure that the crate is large enough for your dog to stand, turn and play with its toys.

Proper timing and scheduling can help your dog to adapt. Be certain that your dog has had sufficient play, exercise, attention, and an opportunity to eliminate before confinement, and that you return before the dog next needs to eliminate. Ideally, even when you are home the pet should be placed in its crate at times of the day when it is due for a nap, or when it normally amuses itself by playing with its own toys. You should use confinement when you cannot supervise your dog. At times when you are at home, you must try to keep the pet with you (except during the pet's nap times), as this is the only way to train and reinforce desirable behavior and direct the pet away from undesirable behavior.

What are the benefits of crate training?

Confinement training has many benefits. It keeps your pet safe and prevents damage to household possessions. The crate also provides a place of security and a comfortable retreat where the dog can relax, sleep, or chew on a favorite toy. Confining the pet to a crate or room when the owner is not available to supervise can immediately prevent behavior problems. If the puppy is crated when it is napping or playing with its own toys, the risk for overattachment and separation anxiety might be reduced. While in the crate the puppy learns to spend time away from the owners, napping or engaging in play behavior. When you are at home, you can supervise your dog, and use rewards to prevent undesirable behavior, and to teach the dog where to eliminate, what to chew, and what rooms and areas are "out of bounds."

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Will cage confinement help with house training?

Crate training is one of the quickest and most effective ways to house train a dog. Since most dogs instinctively avoid eliminating in their sleeping and eating areas, dogs that use their crate as a bed or "den" will seldom eliminate inside unless they have been left in the crate for too long or they are excessively anxious when confined. Crate training can also help teach the dog to develop control over its elimination. As soon as your dog is released from its crate, take it to the designated area and reward elimination at acceptable locations. Since the crate prevents chewing, digging, and elimination on the owner's home and property, owners of crate trained puppies may have fewer behavior concerns, the puppy receives far less discipline and punishment, and the overall relationship between pet and owner can be dramatically improved (see House Training).

Will the crate provoke barking?

The crate can also be a useful way to reduce or eliminate distress barking. Rather than locking the puppy up and away from the owners at nighttime or during mealtime, the puppy can be housed in its crate in the bedroom or kitchen. In this way the puppy cannot get into mischief, and is less likely to cry out or vocalize with the owners in the room. Of course, if the puppy is not napping and you are available to supervise, your puppy should be out and about with you watching closely to insure that it comes to no harm and does not get into mischief. Distress vocalization is far more likely for owners that lock their puppy out of harm's way in a laundry or basement with no access to them. When and if the owner then goes to the puppy to quiet it down or check it out, the crying behavior is rewarded. Puppies that learn to spend time away from their owners may be less likely to develop separation anxiety.

Are there other benefits to caging?



Throughout its life, whether traveling or boarding, your dog may require crate confinement for varying periods of time. Dogs that are comfortable with crating are more likely to feel secure, and far less stressed, should caging be required. By bringing along the dog's bedding or its own crate for boarding or veterinary visits, the pet may feel even more settled and relaxed. Therefore, consider whether a crate will be required at some future date for car travel, airline travel, boarding, traveling with your pet to motels or vacation homes or when visiting friends and relatives.

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Since these events in themselves might cause some anxiety, it is important to accustom your dog to its crate in advance of these events. If you do not, the anxiety of crating combined with the anxiety of the travel experience may be overwhelming. By the same token, dogs that are familiar with their crates may find them sufficiently comforting and calming to reduce the anxiety associated with travel.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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