

Without This, You May Be Depriving Your Dog of Comfort

Dogs instinctively do this to help calm their fears and to seek comfort. Yet many owners view it as a form of punishment and shun the idea. If you haven't yet embraced the concept, I invite you to see it with new eyes. Your dog, young or old, will most likely thank you.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Crate training your dog can be beneficial for housetraining, travel and overnight stays away from home
- Crate training allows you to work with your dog's natural den-dweller instincts and helps her learn how to spend time alone without feeling anxious
- The first rule of crate training is to never force your dog into or out of his crate
- The second rule is to make everything about the crate a positive experience
- Crate training a fearful or crate-averse dog will be a slower process requiring gentle persistence

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I'm a big fan of crate training and recommend it to every dog parent, especially those who need to housetrain a puppy. Whether your canine companion is a puppy or a senior, a new member of your family or an old hand, providing him with his very own cozy space has a number of advantages for both of you. A crate can help not only with housetraining, but also car or plane travel, and overnight stays with friends, family or at a pet-friendly hotel.

Why I Recommend Crate Training for Dogs

Many people equate a crate with a jail cell, but if you understand a little about the nature of dogs, you know this isn't true. If you don't believe me, I encourage you to talk to some dog-loving friends who've crate trained their pups. Chances are they'll tell you their dog seeks out her crate on her own for naps, at bedtime and whenever she just wants a little me time.

A crate allows you to work with your pet's natural desire to be a den dweller. Dogs in the wild seek out small, dark, safe spots to inhabit. In fact, if you bring a new dog into your home and you don't have a crate ready for her, chances are she'll find a spot, such as under a table or chair or even behind the toilet in the bathroom, which answers her need for a secure, out-of-the-way "den" of her own.

If you leave her in her makeshift den, you'll notice that she won't relieve herself there. That's because dogs are programmed by nature not to soil their dens. In the wild, nursing wolves and coyotes teach their pups to relieve themselves outside their dens. This keeps predators from investigating inside their little homes, and keeps messes outside the sleeping area.

And that is exactly why crates are so useful for dogs who haven't yet been **housetrained**. A dog with her own den will not want to soil it, so by providing a crate for her, you're working in harmony with her natural instinct to keep her little space clean. As long as your dog is getting consistent and frequent trips outside to relieve herself, nature will prompt her not to soil her den space in between potty trips.

Another benefit of crate training is that a dog accustomed to spending time alone in her own den even when you are home is much less likely to develop **separation anxiety** or other phobias/panic disorders.

Putting a puppy in her crate for a nap or some quiet time also helps her learn not to expect constant attention from human family members. This strategy coupled with basic obedience training will set the stage for a secure, balanced adult dog who is pleasant to be around.

How to Choose a Crate

When you're purchasing a new crate for your dog, size is important. You want a space that is not too small, but also not too big. Your dog should be able to stand up, lie down and turn around in his crate. It should be large enough for him to move around in comfortably, but not so large that he can easily use one end as his bathroom and the other end for sleeping and snacking. If you need to housetrain your dog, a crate that large can actually slow down the process.

If you're unsure what size crate you need, talk to a store employee about the size of your dog and what you want to accomplish, and he or she should be able to help you pick the right size enclosure. You can also talk to a breeder, your vet or another knowledgeable person about what size crate to buy. If you're crate training a puppy, especially a medium to large breed dog, keep in mind you'll most likely need to graduate to a bigger crate as your pup matures.

When you bring the new crate home, place it in an area where your family spends time — not in an isolated spot, or outdoors, or in a high traffic location, or where your dog will experience temperature extremes.

Make sure there's nothing inside the crate that could cause him harm, including anything around his neck that could get tangled or hung up on a part of the enclosure. As necessary, clean the crate with hot water and a mild soap, or a vinegar/baking soda solution. Rinse and dry thoroughly.

Getting Your Dog Accustomed to Her Crate

If you've purchased a crate ahead of time and it's there when your puppy or dog comes home, as long as she hasn't had a bad experience with confinement in the past, it will be a snap in most cases to get her acclimated to his little den.

The first rule of crate training is to never, ever force your dog into his crate. You never want to introduce a crate, shove your confused pup into it, close the door and leave her. That's how you wind up with a dog with an unmanageable case of separation anxiety or a pathological aversion to enclosed or small spaces.

It's also important to try never to pull your dog out of her crate, either. The crate should represent a safe zone for your dog, so you never want to make her safe zone feel unsafe by forcing her into it or out of it.

The second rule of crate training is called “It’s All Good.” In other words, everything about the crate must be a good thing from your dog’s perspective. While you’re getting her used to her crate, everything she loves goes in there, including treats, treat release and food puzzle toys, chew toys, raw bones — basically anything she loves.

The goal is to have your dog voluntarily go into her crate. What I do with my dogs is drape a blanket over the back half of their crates to create a quiet, dark, den-like environment. My dogs use their crates as bedrooms — they go into them to sleep.

If your pup has had no bad experiences with a crate and you create a safe, dark little den for her inside, she might just go right in voluntarily as soon as you present her new space to her. But even if she takes to her crate right away, you still want to stick with the “it’s all good” rule and put treats, toys and other goodies in there for encouragement.

Crate Training a Fearful Dog

If your dog is nervous about his new little space or is fearful of it due to a bad past experience, you’ll have to take things slower. A dog who has been crated as a form of punishment or has been locked in a crate for inappropriately long periods will need to be gently and patiently reintroduced to his crate.

Obviously you want him to be in there comfortably with the door closed as soon as possible, especially if you’re in the process of potty training. But until he gets the “it’s all good” message about his crate, you’ll need to be extra vigilant about getting him outside to potty at frequent, regular intervals.

Make sure to leave the door to the crate open for a nervous dog. Put food rewards around the outside of the crate and inside as well so he can get comfortable going in and out of the crate without worrying about being “trapped” inside. Move his food and water bowls closer to the crate as another way to associate good things with the crate.

Once you sense your dog is comfortable inside the crate at mealtime, try closing the door as soon as he starts to eat. Do it casually, without fanfare. Praise him in a calm, soothing tone and then get busy with something. Chances are he’ll finish his meal and then realize the door is closed and he’s not free to leave the crate.

He may look at you with an expectant or confused expression as if to say, “What’s the deal with the closed door?” You don’t need to ignore him completely, but you should keep doing what you’re doing and stay very calm as though there’s nothing out of the ordinary going on. Your dog may whine or cry a bit, but he should pretty quickly decide to lie down.

I recommend when you first start closing the crate door that you close it only for short periods of time. You’ll also want to leave a toy or treat inside the crate to keep him entertained. After a few minutes, when your dog has relaxed inside the crate, that’s your signal the crate has gone from being a bad thing to a neutral thing for your dog. Open the door so he can once again come and go as he likes.

Once your dog is associating only good things with the crate and feels comfortable inside it, you can close the door for longer periods of time. Don’t try leaving your house for short periods until he’s completely comfortable in the locked crate while you’re home.

You can gradually extend the amount of time you leave him in the crate, providing he's getting consistent, frequent trips outside to potty. If you need to leave your dog for longer than four hours, I recommend you use a dog sitter or a doggy daycare facility rather than crating him for long stretches. You want him to view his crate as a safe place to rest and be calm, so when he's in there and you're home, resist the urge to energetically interact with him.

When you let your dog out of his crate, give him a sit command and plenty of calm praise when he follows the command. Make entry and exit from the crate a calm, neutral experience and unassociated with any of your dog's behaviors.
