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Crate Training

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Dogs are highly social animals that make wonderful pets. However, with the lifestyle and schedule of the majority of families, dogs must learn to spend a large portion of the day home alone. Too much freedom is the number one reason that puppies get into trouble. A puppy that is left unsupervised to wander, investigate and destroy things will have a difficult time learning how to behave properly in your home. Crates are intended to be transitional for most dogs, although some are happy to keep their crates for life. When properly crate trained, dogs spend their time resting and/or sleeping in the crate.

It is common to hear that dogs are denning animals, so crating appeals to their natural instincts. This is not entirely true, though. First, dogs or wolves den only when they are pregnant, nursing or raising young puppies. The use of the den is abandoned altogether when puppies are approximately 10 to 12 weeks of age. Second, dens are large enough for all the pups to be kept safe and secure together. They are not isolated from each other. Third, dens do not have large metal doors! Pups venture several feet from their dens to investigate and play, but return quickly at the first sound of trouble! The misunderstanding of a dog's denning instinct can lead owners to mistakenly believe that puppies should readily adapt to being crated.

We expect a lot from a puppies! He is abruptly removed from his litter and put into a large metal or plastic box, isolated away from social contact. We then expect that he will instinctually acclimate to his crate and wonder why he barks and cries. Puppies bark and cry to seek social contact when they are separated from their pack. What a huge adjustment!

There is a big difference between crating a puppy and crate training a puppy. Crate training takes some time, but the result is a dog that is happy to stay in his crate. A puppy that is confined without being properly crate trained may experience anxiety and could possibly injure himself. He may bark or cry, try to escape by digging or chewing his way out. Some may even eliminate in their crates. Here are the important steps to follow when crate training your puppy:

- You may choose either the plastic *airline* crates or the metal/wire crates with tray floors. Most dogs prefer the metal crates because they can see out from all sides.
- The crate should be large enough for the puppy to stand up, turn around and lie down comfortably. Crates can be stuffed with pillows or some other barricade for growing puppies. Crates should not be larger than necessary in order to ensure proper housebreaking while in the crate.
- Be sure that your puppy has had the opportunity to play, eat, and eliminate before going into his crate.
- Remember, young puppies must eliminate frequently (every 1-2 hours when they are awake). Puppies should not be crated for more than a few hours at a time. That time can increase as the pup's bladder and kidneys develop.
- An ideal location for the crate is a room where the family spends time such as a family room or bedroom.
- Leave the door open and throw a few treats inside, allowing the puppy to freely walk in and out.
- Feed the puppy's meals in the crate while you are home.

- Once the pup enters the crate to retrieve treats without hesitation, throw another treat in and close the door. Praise him while inside for a few moments and open the door again, allowing him to exit.
- Several times during the day, throw a treat in while stating a command such as *kennel or crate*. This will help him to pair the command with entering the crate.
- While you are home, have the puppy enter the crate on command with a treat and close the door. Do this several times during the day. Begin training with short sessions. While he is in the crate, leave the room and return on a random basis. Gradually increase the time the puppy spends in the crate while you are home.
- The puppy should not associate being crated with your leaving for the day. Many dogs become anxious when their owners leave. Dogs need to be trained to accept being alone in addition to being crate trained.
- During training, do not let your puppy out of the crate when he is crying, barking, scratching, etc. Wait for at least 15 to 30 seconds of quiet *before* letting him out. Do not *reward* his behavior by releasing him during these times.
- If your puppy begins to panic when crated, you must crate train in much smaller steps. It is one thing to not reward barking, it is entirely another thing to cause your puppy to become anxious by going too quickly. If you feel that your puppy is becoming anxious, return to the room where he is crated, but do not give him any attention. He may be comforted by your presence enough to calm down. Once he is calm, you will be more apt to get the 15 or 30 seconds of quiet needed before allowing him out of the crate.
- Do not reprimand your puppy for making noise in the crate. His crate needs to be a secure place for him. Reprimands can make him more anxious in the crate. Likewise, do not place your puppy in his crate to punish him.
- Be sure to act neutral when letting your dog out of his crate in order to diffuse his excitement level after a day of confinement.
- Do not place food, water or rawhides in the crate when you leave for the day. If necessary, freeze a small container of water and place that in the crate or purchase a *ballpoint cage waterer*. (Available in most pet stores.)