



Critters corner presents:

Crate Training

Overview

Although opinions vary about the value of crate training, a crate can be a useful tool when house training a young puppy, or even an adult dog. For dogs, a crate can be a place of sanctuary, a place of retreat from the busy home life. Some experts consider properly conducted crate training as imperative as appropriate healthcare, timely neutering, and obedience training. At the other end of the spectrum are folk who would no sooner confine a dog to a crate than lock their children in the laundry closet.

Not all dogs respond the same way to crates. Some gravitate to them willingly; others detest them and will injure themselves in them while trying to escape. Why the difference? Nurture and developmental experience have a lot to do with the answer. Dogs forced to stay in crates, or other small confined places, under extreme adverse circumstances develop a "post-traumatic" association and will panic when confronted with similar confinement. On the other hand, a dog that has been well managed in a crate as a youngster may positively revel his crate as a place of security and comfort.

- Bad experiences in a crate include lengthy confinement for many hours at a time, infrequent attention during confinement, and absence of attachment figures. For dogs that have had unpleasant experiences in a crate, confinement may be viewed in the same light as prison to an ex-inmate - an experience to be avoided.
- Good experiences in a crate include circumstances that permit the crate to be viewed as a retreat or place of comfort, freedom to come and go (the door is left open periodically so that the dog is not always confined), company inside or outside the crate, and regular feeding and bathroom trips.

For a dog that has been well acclimated, a crate can be a haven, a place of comfort, a retreat from the world...a den, in fact. Many dog owners think that, because dogs are den dwellers at heart, they will all automatically appreciate a crate. But real dens do not have doors. This is why care must be taken to encourage your dog to view his den as a retreat or sanctuary.

Crate Training Your Puppy

For the owner, careful crate training can help to deal with housebreaking. Most dogs respect the sanctity of den, and their nature directs them against soiling the nest area. Thus, a crate can be used to confine a dog between unsuccessful excursions to a selected outside "bathroom" area.

No matter what age you begin crate training your dog, all experiences within the crate should be good ones. Ideally, begin with a very young pup (the most malleable substrate), and establish good associations with each exposure to the crate. This can be arranged by:

- Allowing the pup free access to the crate so that he can come and go at will prior to confining him
- Make the crate a comfortable place by putting a blanket and perhaps some toys inside
- Praise the pup every time he goes in the crate
- Confine the pup (shut the door of the crate) for short periods of time, at first, ensuring that company is at hand (either you or a closely bonded canine counterpart)
- Never use the crate as a place of punishment
- Make sure that no one disturbs the pup when he is inside the crate so the crate comes to be appreciated as a place of refuge

Using the above protocol, there is no reason that the dog should not gravitate toward the crate for rest and relaxation. If this is achieved, the dog will find the crate amongst his favorite places in life. Unfortunately, because of bad experiences, many dogs grow up loathing their crate with a vengeance, acting out in one way or another whenever they are confined.

Crate Training Your Adult Dog

The following is a program by which older dogs can be introduced or even reintroduced to crates as a place of refuge. The goal is to systematically desensitize the dog by making the crate appear as benign as possible.

- Position the crate in a high traffic area of the house and make the interior of the crate comfortable and inviting
- Enrich the space with food treats/toys and initially, always leave the door open
- Feed the dog progressively closer to the entrance of the crate, and reward him with praise as he gets closer to the crate
- Eventually, move the food bowl across the threshold of the crate and then just inside the crate so that he has to put his head and shoulders inside in order to eat
- Move the food bowl progressively further towards the back of the crate so that the dog has to go further inside to eat
- Always praise the dog for being in or near the crate
- Do not confine the dog in the crate until he shows that he will enter willingly and of his own accord
- If things go well with the acclimation, the next thing is to try closing and fastening the door for brief periods, while staying in the area.
- Gradually, the duration of confinement can be increased. Eventually you may be able to leave the dog confined for considerable periods of time and have tranquility prevail
- Do not leave the dog alone in the crate while you are away until he is perfectly comfortable being in it while you are there

The program may take time but it will work. **Note:** With any behavioral modification scheme, like crate training, the golden rule is that if there is no progress in 3 to 5 days, change the strategy. It is important to emphasize throughout training and beyond that the crate should never be a place in which the dog has any negative experiences.

Dominant Dogs and Crates

In general, dominant dogs resist anything that they don't like and will protect anything that they enjoy. If you try to force a dominant dog into a crate against his will, you have a pretty good idea of how he will respond. You might get such a dog into the crate eventually, but only with much growling, snapping, or even attempts to bite. Conversely, a dominant dog that views his crate as his own personal space may take the opposite tack and begin space guarding, i.e. growling at people who approach the crate or attempt to remove him.

Crating Dogs with Separation Anxiety

For some dogs with separation anxiety, the crate can be a place of refuge from their woes. They may be much happier inside a crate when their owner is away than when wandering free. For others, crates are an imposition, a misery, and an obstacle to be overcome at the expense of broken teeth and fractured claws. Owners return home to find these dogs bug-eyed, in a frenzy, and salivating profusely, and may even come home to find the crate splattered with urine, feces, and/or blood. For such dogs, the use of a crate is not a good approach, at least, not without a lot of retraining.

Crating the Compulsives

Then there is the third group of crate-astrophes, the compulsive dogs. These dogs may have already suffered boredom and inadequate stimulation as a result of long hours of confinement. Such dogs, depending on their individual predilections will, variously, lick themselves, spin in circles, chase their own tails, or pace mindlessly. And crates may precipitate such behavior. Crates are usually contraindicated for dogs with such conditions.

Conclusion

Crates are good tools for some dogs, some of the time. But, even when the crate works well for a dog, it is unwise to confine the dog for more than 4 to 6 hours a day to avoid having the crate becoming associated with negative experiences. Every dog should have an open door crate to go in if they so desire: A place to go when things get hectic, just for a little peace. Used in this way, a crate can be as much appreciated by the dog as having a room of their own room is appreciated by teenagers. And it is possible, once the dog

enjoys the crate to close the door on occasion. But remember, confinement is for the convenience of the owners, not the dog's, and should be employed sparingly.