



HOME

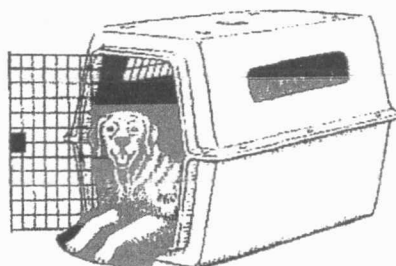
It's A Den, Not A Jail

By Marty Guerra

"I wouldn't put my kid in there." This is something a client actually said when I tried to explain the benefits of crate training her young dog. I replied "That's great, I wouldn't want you to put your kid in there!" This demonstrates the anthropomorphic views many people have regarding a crate. It would not be appropriate to put a child in a crate. That's obvious! A human child does not harbor the same instincts and nature as a dog. That too is obvious. A crate is not a "doggy prison" as many consider it to be. A crate is a "den", a sheltered and secure place your dog or puppy can call his/her own. If you introduce your dog to a crate in a positive way you will be giving yourself and your dog an invaluable tool.

WHY CRATE?

In the wild, Dogs are naturally denning animals. They seek out places that are sheltered and secure to raise their pups. The den contributes to the packs survival and offers protection. This instinct has been passed down to our domesticated doggies. Den like settings have a calming affect on dogs. You may even see this behavior with your own dog.



Ever see your dog curl up in a corner, under a table or desk, under your legs as they are propped up on a table, etc.? If you have, you've witnessed the denning instinct in action. When you bring a new puppy or dog home and just let it roam around the yard or inside the house, while you're at work or running errands, you are asking the pup to "fend for itself", to survive in a new, strange environment. The problem is that your puppy does not have the physical or psychological skills needed to survive on its own. So, your puppy gets very nervous and anxious. He or she is going to look for ways to relieve that anxiety. The typical things dogs do to calm themselves down are; bark, escape, destructively chew, dig, pace back and forth, etc. By crate training your puppy or dog, you can relieve his/her stress in an appropriate manner. This "den" will calm and settle your

pet's anxiety and provide you with an invaluable management and training tool. Ask yourself this question: "would I rather return home to find a mess and scold my dog, or would I rather return home and let my dog out of his crate, greet and play with him? The benefits to crate training are many, but the most important one is that it can prevent unwanted behaviors from developing like destructive chewing for example. Your cute, cuddly companion can't shred your clothes and furniture to bits when it is in a crate. What he can do is chew on a couple of appropriate chew toys you give him or take a nap. By establishing a routine for your dog many problems can be prevented and the crate is a very effective management tool. Look at the alternatives to not crate training your dog: finding piles of poop and puddles of pee, furniture torn up, clothes in shreds, garbage all over the place, or worse, your dog or puppy seriously hurt or dead because it got into some chemicals, poison or chewed through an electrical cord. Crate training also facilitates potty-training (dogs typically will not soil their space. However, there are exceptions to this rule). It's a temporary playpen for when you are unable to monitor the dog or puppy's activity. Crates are a great bed for your dog and prevent the dog from roaming about the house at night. Crates are the safest way for a dog to ride in the car.

WHAT KIND OF CRATE?

I recommend the molded plastic type (as seen in the above photo). The plastic crates offer more "shelter" and security for a dog because they're enclosed. However, if you've already purchased a wire type crate, you can provide more security by covering it with a blanket or something. Most importantly, the crate needs to be the right size. Make sure the dog can stand up, turn around and lie down. The crate shouldn't be too big (especially for a young puppy) young dogs often find larger spaces to be very uncomfortable. Also, a crate that is too large can ruin your toilet-training efforts because the dog can eliminate at one end and then move to the other and lie down. If you have a puppy, get a crate that is large enough for your puppy to grow into, then insert partitions inside for now. Cinder blocks work very well as partitions. They are indestructible. Just be aware of what you use as a partition. Make sure it cannot be destroyed and consumed.

TAKE A POSITIVE APPROACH

It is your responsibility to teach your dog (no matter what age it is) that the crate is the best thing in the world and a great place to be. You must make sure that every interaction your dog has with his new den is a pleasant one. DO NOT go and buy a crate, take it home and shove your dog into it. Close the door and leave. Give your dog a

few days to get used to his new den. Don't put it in the basement or some other out-of-the-way place. Make it part of the environment. Surround it with treats. Encourage your dog every time he goes near it "good dog." Okay, so how do you get the dog to go inside? Well, that depends on who you talk to. What I've done with my new puppy, is to gently place her in the crate and reinforce her (I "clicked" and gave her a bit of chicken) the instant she was inside. Then let her out and did it again. After 6 repetitions she was throwing herself into the crate. I then added the cue "kennel" because I just knew she was going to go inside. I then started to withhold her reinforcement for longer and longer periods of time, which means that she had to remain inside for longer periods of time in order to receive her treat. At this point she was going in on command with me within 10 feet of the crate. So, I started moving farther and farther away. Now we can say "kennel" from anywhere in the house and she'll charge into it. Sometimes she gets a treat but most of the time she does not. She never knows, and that's what keeps her going, the possibility of a treat. We accomplished this over a one and a half day period. Total time spent on actual training was approximately one and a half hours. It is important to mention that I had her go into the crate about 40 times before ever closing the door and leaving the house. When I did leave the house, I gave her a Kong stuffed with cream cheese and dog kibble. She learned that my leaving and her isolation produced a very yummy treat. Thus reducing and eliminating any anxiety about being left alone.

A recent client had a 4 month old Lab puppy that he wanted to crate train. With this puppy we conditioned him to chase the light of a laser pointer. We shined the light on the wall and when the puppy took notice we clicked and treated him. We did this a few times and then began to move the light around. When he followed it, click and treat. This took less than 5 minutes for this little guy. So we started having him follow the light into the crate. When he crossed the threshold of the crate, click and treat. We did this ten times then began to add the cue "kennel" as he crossed the threshold. The pup loved this game and began going into the crate on his own and waiting for us to give him a treat. What a nut. We then began to give the command, and then running the light into the crate from a greater distance. We then began to wait a little longer before reinforcing, and so on. After a weekend of this the puppy would go into the crate on command. We weaned away the light, clicker and treats within a few days. This training we did from the comfort of the sofa while enjoying a refreshing beverage. The point is – that you'll make of it what you will. If you make it a negative, confrontational chore, that's what it will be. If you make it a fun and enjoyable game, then that's

what it will be. The choice is YOURS.

You can also feed your dog in the crate. While you are putting the dog's food inside, give a placement command such as "crate," "bed," or "kennel." Pick something and use it. This will eliminate you calling the dog to you to put it in its crate, which could curtail your recall ("come" when called) training efforts. Once your dog is comfortable in the crate with the door closed, leave the room, and eventually your house for increased periods of time. Expect your dog to whine and carry on a bit when you initially leave the room and/or at bedtime. This is a normal reaction to being left alone and does not mean the dog "doesn't like the crate." Remember, dogs are social animals and many (especially young puppies) do not like being isolated. Always wait until the dog is quiet before opening the door. If you let it out because it's whining and carrying on, you'll teach it that "freedom" is just a whine or bark away. By acclimating your dog to the crate while you're at home, it won't associate the crate with being left alone.

DON'TS

1. Never use the crate as punishment. Time outs are okay when done with out emotion (no screaming, yelling etc.)
2. Don't over use the crate. Your dog should not be "living" in it.
3. Do not force your dog into its crate, especially if he wigs out at the mere sight of it.

By taking your time and letting your dog become acclimated to the crate, you can have an invaluable training tool and your companion can have a place to call his own.