

THE HOME YOU OWN

Should you crate your dog? It's complicated.

Dogs aren't wired to instinctively love their crates. Here's how experts advise helping them adjust — and why some never will.

By Kelly Conaboy

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I sometimes refer to my dog's crate as his apartment. It's large enough that I can fit in there with him (sized for "extra large" dogs, while he is "medium" sized) and it's outfitted with a memory foam dog bed, two pillows, and a sherpa blanket. He likes to hang out in there with the door open during the day, and if I need to leave him home alone, he races in at the mention of "crate," knowing that once he gets there he'll get a treat. Still, whenever I close the door and lock him inside, I'm met with a wave of guilt. Is it okay to keep a sentient being cooped up like that, even if only for a few hours?

The practice of keeping your dog confined in a cage for periods of time is a divisive one. PETA is plainly against it, and it's not common in Europe — even illegal in most cases in Finland and Sweden. Still, the virtue of crate training puppies is espoused here in the United States, where crating often continues into a dog's adult life. Some dogs sleep in their cages, and some dogs spend the day there while their human is at work. Those on the pro side often claim their dogs feel safe in their crates, and that they can be a useful tool for positive behavioral change. But is that true, or a convenient myth?

Kate Anderson, assistant clinical professor at Cornell's Duffield Institute for Animal Behavior, says the use of crates can be beneficial when house-training puppies, setting unsupervised dogs up for success, giving dogs a quiet place to relax, and making car travel safe and comfortable. But the benefits are contingent on the crate being introduced correctly, and whether the dog truly feels calm and comfortable when inside.

"Not all dogs can be crated," Anderson says. "In particular, dogs with separation-related behavior problems often display distressed behavior when crated." While it may seem like crating can be a quick fix for dogs who display destructive or otherwise anxious behaviors when left alone, Anderson says it often only exacerbates the underlying issues.

If your dog seems distressed in his crate, is destructive, attempts to escape, or causes self-injury by scratching or biting, “do not simply secure the current crate or buy a more industrial crate,” Anderson says, “since this does not address the underlying cause of this behavior.” Instead, work with your veterinarian to figure out why your dog is displaying the behavior, and how you can help him feel more at ease. Crates aren’t for every dog, and they may not be for yours.

Nonetheless, the persistent characterization of dogs as “den animals” often leads to the assumption that any pup will instinctively acclimate to a crate. “The saying that dogs are den animals has been tossed around so much,” says Renée Erdman, a behavior consultant specializing in dog aggression and dog reactivity, “that people think there’s something wrong with their dog if they *don’t* like the crate.”

Erdman says this is a misconception — while wild pups are born in, and spend their first few weeks in dens, most of their lives are spent roaming free. Other experts agree this does not qualify them as den animals in the way we’ve been led to believe. Beyond that, dens don’t have a latched door controlled by another entity.

More likely than not, spending time in a crate is going to take your pup some getting used to. Erdman recommends introducing it slowly, and with a lot of positive reinforcement. “We don’t want to throw them into the deep end of the water, which would be just putting them in a crate for hours at a time and letting them cry it out,” she says. “That is not a good approach.” Marny Nofi, director of the ASPCA’s behavioral sciences team, agrees. “If a dog has not been properly trained to be relaxed in a crate,” she says, “then confining them to a crate can be distressing and harmful to their emotional well-being.”

Even though dogs aren’t born with an affinity for being crated, Nofi says there are a number of ways dog guardians can encourage their dogs to feel safe in a crate, and build positive associations with it. Her first piece of guidance is selecting an appropriately sized crate and placing it in a safe location in the home. But what size is appropriate? Probably larger than you think — dogs should be able to stand up, turn around, lie down, and stretch out their limbs completely in their crate. “Extended periods in a crate that is too small can be physically uncomfortable,” Nofi says, “and in extreme cases, it can lead to musculoskeletal problems.”

You’ll want to make the crate comfortable with soft bedding, and make use of enrichment items to help keep your dog occupied during their time without other stimulation. Important, too, Nofi says, is refraining from using the crate as punishment or using force to get your dog inside. You want your dog to view his crate as a safe, calm place to relax; if he’s made to stay there during times of heightened stress, he’ll form negative associations rather than positive.

One source of worry for me is whether I’m leaving my dog in his crate for too long. For an adult dog, Nofi says, time in the crate should be limited to four or five hours, with 30 to 60 minutes of exercise beforehand. And if you’re crating both during the day and at night, each crating period should follow 60 to 90 minutes of exercise, focused enrichment, or training. “If your dog is distressed in the crate, is not having their exercise needs met, or their overall well-being seems compromised,” Nofi says, “you should reassess if crating is right for your dog.”

If crating isn't right for you or your dog (for reasons covered here or others, like certain health issues), but you'd still like to limit where your dog can roam while unsupervised, Erdman recommends making use of an exercise pen or baby gate to create a dog-friendly zone. With these options, your dog can have more freedom of movement, while still being kept from anything that might pose a risk to them.

Every expert I spoke with agreed that learning to be comfortable in a crate has the potential to benefit most dogs, whether it be for daily use or for special circumstances like after a medical procedure. But they all wanted to stress, too, that crates shouldn't be used as a replacement for training, and they shouldn't be used to avoid a dog's pleas for attention and connection — this goes for puppies as well as adult dogs. “A puppy or young dog can be tiring,” Nofi says, “but it's unfair and negligent to keep them in a crate rather than provide the training they need.”

I'm lucky that my dog seems to genuinely feel comfortable in his crate. Still, I'm not sure I'll ever feel great about keeping him locked inside for hours at a time. In the future, I might explore giving him a bit more freedom when he's left at home alone — perhaps dog-proof the bedroom or living room, and train myself to feel less anxious. For now, though, I just hope he feels safe in his apartment.

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