

# Den Dynamics

BY LIZ PALIKA

A crate is a multipurpose training tool that paves the way to a well-behaved dog and a calm home.

A new puppy is a wonderful addition to the family. A puppy has unlimited potential as a long-time companion. But that potential can come to a screaming halt if the puppy ruins carpets, chews up furniture and raids the garbage. There is, however, a training tool that will enable you to train your new pup to be a well-behaved and well-adjusted family member: a crate.

## KINDS OF CRATES

Two types of crates are most commonly used. The first type is made of heavy molded plastic or fiberglass and was originally used by airlines to transport dogs and other animals. These crates usually come in three parts: the top half, the bottom half and the door. Because this crate can be dismantled, it is easy to clean.

The second type of crate is wire. Because of their open construction, these crates provide good ventilation. However, some dogs feel vulnerable in this type of crate and might do better in a plastic crate. A towel or cover thrown over a wire crate can add to the dog's feeling of security and privacy if this type of crate is chosen.

It's important that you, as the new puppy's owner, understand that a crate is not a jail. The crate will become your puppy's bed, its place to rest and its place to hide when it is tired or overwhelmed. Puppies like to sleep in small, close places. That's why they curl up under your desk, under your chair or under the back porch. A crate allows you to satisfy this denning instinct and use it as a training tool.

Choose a crate size that will suit your puppy when it is full grown. The crate should be large enough for an adult dog of your puppy's breed to stand up, turn around, lie down and stretch out. Beware, though; more is not better. Don't get a crate that would fit an adult St. Bernard for a Springer Spaniel puppy. If the crate is too big, the pup can relieve itself in a far corner and have enough room to get away from it and still have a clean bed. This is especially detrimental when using the crate as a housetraining tool. The purpose in using a crate for housetraining is to utilize the puppy's instinct to keep its bed clean.

## INTRODUCING THE CRATE

Once you have the crate at home, set it up in a place where the puppy will have easy access to it. Prop open the door and toss a dog treat inside. As the puppy runs in to get the treat, say, "Fido, crate!" in a happy tone. Let the puppy grab the treat and run back out. Repeat this a few times, using the command and allowing the puppy to come right back out each time.

Next, place the puppy's food bowl in the back of the crate so that the puppy must step inside to eat. Leave the crate door open, allowing the puppy to come and go as it pleases. Repeat this for the next two or three meals. If the puppy seems unconcerned and eats readily in the crate, for the next meal, place the food bowl inside, invite the puppy in and then close the door behind the puppy. Watch the pup, and as soon as it has finished

■ eating, open the door and let the puppy out. For the next meal, leave the door closed for a few minutes after the puppy has finished eating.

■ By now the puppy should associate the crate with food, which is important. This helps make the crate a positive experience. At this time, however, stop feeding the puppy in the crate; go back to feeding the puppy in the kitchen or wherever it was normally fed. To maintain the puppy's positive feelings about the crate, continue to offer your puppy a treat each time you tell it to go inside.

■ At this point, invite the puppy into the crate with a treat, and close the door behind it for gradually increasing lengths of time, from just a few minutes to half an hour or more. If your puppy throws a temper tantrum, wait until the puppy calms down before letting it out. If you let it out when it screams or thrashes around, you have taught it that temper tantrums work. Instead, say, "No! Quiet!" in a firm tone. Let the puppy out when it is quiet and calm.

■ At night, put the crate next to your bed while you sleep. This is eight hours that the puppy can be near you, smelling you and hearing you breathe and snore. Just being close to you will reassure the puppy. If the puppy becomes restless, you will hear it and be able to take it outside. If the puppy wakes up and wants to play, just reach over, tap the top of the crate and say, 'No, quiet!' in a firm tone.

## ■ **HOUSETRAINING**

■ A crate can be a useful housetraining tool because most puppies do not want to soil where they sleep. Even very young puppies still with their mother will toddle away from mom and their littermates to relieve themselves. By crating a puppy for gradually increased period of time, the puppy learns the control necessary to "hold it" until it is let outside to relieve itself.

■ When the puppy is not in the crate and is in the house with you, don't let the puppy run free all over the house. Keep the puppy in the same room with you so that you can watch it playing. If the puppy starts to circle or squat, correct it with "Acck! Not here!" and take the puppy outside.

■ One of the biggest mistakes most new puppy owners make is letting the puppy have too much freedom too soon. By the time they find the dried puddles of urine behind the kids' beds upstairs or the piles of feces hidden in the back bedroom, the puppy already has developed a bad habit that must be broken. So supervise the puppy, limit its freedom, and when you can't watch it, put the puppy outside or in its crate.

■ When housetraining your puppy, set up a schedule for the puppy's meals, playtime, crate time and trips outside. Try to follow this routine as closely as possible. The puppy needs to go outside after eating, after playtime, after waking up from naps, and for the young puppy, about every three hours in between.

■ If you work away from home, don't plan to leave the puppy in its crate all day. That is too long for the puppy to be crated without a chance to eliminate or play. If your yard is safe and secure, leave the puppy outside, or hire a neighbor to come over and let your puppy outside a couple of times each day.

## ■ **PREVENTING PROBLEMS**

■ Puppies don't intentionally get into trouble; it's just that our things are so attractive to puppies. After all, a couch cushion can be a lot of fun when it is shaken and the stuffing flies everywhere. Leather shoes and

rawhide chews are similar to many puppies; in fact, because of your smell in the shoes, they are doubly appealing.

Many of the destructive things that puppies do can be prevented by using the crate and some common sense. If you can't watch the puppy, put it outside (if your yard is safe and secure), or put it in the crate. The puppy cannot dump over the trash, chew up the couch or destroy your leather shoes if it is crated.

By preventing these problems from developing, you are working to establish good habits. The puppy never finds out that the trashcan is fun, or that leather shoes taste good. Instead, the puppy is chews on the toy you tossed into the crate. Instead of learning to be destructive, the puppy learns to chew on appropriate toys, to sleep and to be quiet.

## **SECURITY**

A crate provides security away from home. If the puppy ever needs to be boarded or stay at the veterinarian's office, send its crate along with it. The dog will feel more secure with its familiar refuge.

Also, teaching your puppy to ride in the crate in the car could save its life someday. Thousands of dogs are killed in car accidents each year. Transporting the dog in a seat-belted crate could save its life and keep it from interfering with you as you drive.

## **CRATES AND ADULT DOGS**

As your dog matures, it can be given more freedom in the house, and you might even start to leave the crate door open at night or when you are away from home. Should the dog make a mistake or get into trouble, close the crate door again. The dog needs to prove its reliability to earn its freedom.

You will probably find that as your dog grows up, it will still use its crate, going in on its own to sleep or chew on a toy. Because the crate is your dog's special place, it will retreat there when the family is busy or when it simply needs some peace and quiet. Your dog may go there when it's not feeling well, or when it wants to hide a bone or toy from the new baby or the new puppy.

Because this is such a valuable training tool, some owners unintentionally go overboard using it. Unless the veterinarian has said that the dog should stay in the crate for health reasons, you need to pay attention to how long the dog is crated during the day, or over a 24-hour period, day in and day out. Keeping a dog or puppy crated all day while you are at work for six, eight or more hours is much too long and in some circumstances could even be considered cruel.

Although all dogs should be able to spend the night in the crate, provided it is in your bedroom close to you, many puppies and geriatric dogs will need to be taken outside once or twice during the night.

When you are home with the puppy, either during the day, on weekends or in the evening, your puppy (or dog) will need time to play, run, exercise, chase birds, roll in the grass and just be a dog, as well as spend time with you. When inside, if you can watch it, let it follow you around; if you can't, crate it again. If you go back and forth--crate time, outside time and time with you--you and your puppy will be fine.

Liz Palika and her husband, Paul, share their home with three Australian Shepherds. Liz, a writer and dog trainer, enjoys obedience competition and trained many of her dogs in schutzhund, carting, Frisbee

competition, and search and rescue. She is a member of the Dog Writers Association of America and the National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors.