

## **Crate training**

Even the newest of the newcomers to the world of dogs has probably heard or simply already knows that dogs are den animals seeking a small confined enclosure for both comfort and security. It is because of this basic understanding that the dog community has come to embrace, promote, and practically insist on raising dogs with kennels or crates (the words are often used interchangeably) as their den be they kept as a house or outside dog. Used as a means to reduce stress, prevent unwanted behavior, housebreak a pup, or providing a measure of added safety dog crates are of tremendous value to every owner. Whether living with a dog of eight weeks, eight years, or eighteen years a crate is an asset to the dog owner.

For the gun dog owner the crate becomes a traveling doghouse to which the dog accustomed and that provides a measure of normalcy and safety when on the road moving from hunting area to hunting area or motel-to-motel. In fact, without a crate many dog friendly motels suddenly become hostile to the idea of letting you keep your companion in the room with you out of fear that there will be unpreventable damage done to the room.

Contrary to the beliefs of the few detractors that decry the use of crates for our canine companions, the majority of dogs favor their crate over other types of confinement and even no confinement at all. Even the youngest of pups, when properly introduced to the crate will show an astonishing desire to use the crate for rest and security. It is for this reason that crate confinement is an inappropriate form of punishment. For one, a dog simply does not understand the concept of being “sent to his room” and for another a dog needs a safety net where it can feel secure and that is the crate. Taking that away from your dog because of untold disciplinary measures doled out with a crate could cause your dog to exhibit further unwanted behaviors.

Where you chose to keep the crate is usually a matter of preference but I recommend that it be kept near the family’s primary living space as opposed to a laundry room, basement, or other such area. Since most spaniels are rather compact in size their crates are as well and they can often fit in well to the average family room, dining area, or kitchen. It is important to note that although the crate may be kept in close proximity to the rest of the family it is still the dog’s den and should be treated with respect. When the dog is in his kennel, he should be free from

pestering by young children. Do not allow any child to intrude on the dog's space by crawling into his crate no matter how cute such activity may seem to be.

### **Crate types**

Dog crates come in two basic types; metal-wire and plastic. Which is preferred is really a matter of personal preference. In warmer weather, I like to house the dog in a metal-wire crate because of the added airflow it provides. When traveling during the cold winter months, I prefer a plastic crate that has less airflow, maintains a warmer environment for the dog, and does a better job of keeping all the dripping mud and debris from dirtying the inside of my car or truck.

### **General tips**

Whatever the type used I like to have bedding in the crate for the dog's comfort even though I find that most dogs simply push the bedding aside and lay on the bare floor. I normally do not give dogs under the age of twelve to eighteen months for two specific reasons bedding for two specific reasons. The first is that some young dogs, puppies mostly, will learn that bedding can absorb or hide their *accidents* should they urinate or defecate in the crate and they take advantage of this understanding relieving themselves more frequently than is necessary. The second is that young dogs need to chew as they grow and they find that the bedding makes for a wonderful chew toy no matter how many other such toys you put in the crate with them.

While I always have water available to a dog outside of the crate this is not generally the case for a dog kept in his crate. The obvious exception to this is when the temperature or other conditions warrant having a supply of water amply at hand. Too much water provided to a dog that is going to be staying in his kennel for the next eight to nine hours is simply asking for an accident to happen. Under most conditions, a mature dog can comfortably go eight to ten hours without water readily at hand.

Using the crate as the spot where you feed the dog helps to keep the dog away from the dinner table during meals and lets him understand that the kennel is truly his den. Feed your dog at the same time that you sit down to dinner by having it go to its kennel and placing the food in the kennel with him. When the family has finishes dinner, the pup can come out of his crate.

Finally, use caution when crating your dog with a collar on. A simple buckle collar is not likely to be a problem but never leave a choke or chain collars of any type on your dog when it is in a crate.

### **Size matters**

The best size crate for your dog will depend upon his age, level of conditioning, and, of course, physical size. As an adult dog, your hunting partner needs enough room to be able to stand, stretch, and turn around comfortably. While most kennel manufacturers provide a list of appropriate breeds for their various crate configurations it is always best to double check the anticipated size of your dog as an adult against the manufacturers' recommendations.

Never start a young puppy out in a crate sized for an adult dog. This will only lead to problems of crate soiling, as the pup will learn that it can easily relieve itself at one end of the crate while staying perfectly comfortable at the other end. If this happens too often, you are likely to face a frustrating and time-consuming solution.

No matter what the age of your dog it should have a crate sized appropriately. This may mean having to provide your dog with as many as three different crates between the time of early puppyhood and when he reaches full physical maturity. While this may seem a bit costly, the benefits realized from keeping the pup in the appropriate sized crate will be well worth the money spent. There are ways to reduce the cost of crate purchases including shopping for puppy crates at garage sales or thrift stores and realizing that you can hold off purchasing the fancy super deluxe model until the pup has reached maturity. Just remember that there is a cost to not properly crate training your pup and that cost is borne out in housebreaking problems, damaged furniture resulting from a chewing frenzy, destroyed shoes and clothing, a possibly an injured – or worse – dog that chewed or ate the wrong thing while you were away. Your pup is too valuable a companion to not provide the proper means by which to house it while you are away or unable to keep a close eye on it.

### **Crate Introduction**

If everything is going perfectly then you have been able to get your pup during the day and you have some time to work with him before he has to spend his first night away from his littermates.

This will give you time to practice all of the steps that follow and begin the process of crate training on a positive note. Should it be that this is not the case and you are taking the pup home in the evening then try to get the time to follow these steps beginning bright and early the next day.

As best you can, you need to make crate training a positive experience for the dog. A wise and helpful breeder will introduce a crate while the pup is still with his littermates. For instance, when I raise a litter of pups, around the age of six weeks I place a crate, with the door removed, into the puppy pen. Within hours, the pups are instinctively using that crate as their place to pile up with one another and sleep. This positive association makes the transition to a crate with a door much smoother.

Whether your breeder has done some preliminary conditioning for you or not when you first get your pup home have his crate ready. When the time seems right, take a dog treat – make it a good one like a small piece of a hot dog – and lure the pup into the crate by first letting it sniff the treat and then tossing it inside the crate. As the pup walks into the crate to get the treat say “kennel” in a calm and matter-of-fact voice. This allows you to associate the word kennel with the action of the pup going into his crate and thus begins the entire training process. Repeat this process several times throughout the day for the first few days and your pup will quickly learn the meaning of this command.

At some point, you will have to begin to close the door on the crate and secure the pup for a while. Before you do this, it is best to make certain that the pup has done his business and will probably not have to go again for a little while, of course pups are not always cooperative and if you simply must crate the pup without it having gone potty beforehand, well, do what you must. Lure the pup into his crate as you did earlier, give him some gentle praise, and toss in a toy with which he can occupy his time. If the pup has been very active prior to this it is probably going to settle down in short order and drift off to sleep but if not, a toy will help to keep him occupied while in there. If the crate is in the main living area and you need to leave the room try to stay with the pup for a while before doing so. He is probably going to be whining or barking a bit after you first close the crate, so with you in the room, you can talk to him and attempt to reassure him that you are there and everything is fine. Whatever you do, do not remove him from

the crate while he is barking or whining; doing so will simply begin to teach him that such behavior is all that is needed to gain his release. Your biggest challenge here is to form and stick to a resolve that you will not give into your pup's whining and barking after closing the crate door. All will likely go well if you can stick to that plan.

Once the pup has quieted down for a short time, say 10 seconds or more, open the crate door and let him lose. If it has been a while since he last did his business usher him outside and let him relieve himself. If you are sure that he does not have to go potty again then allow him some free time to play before putting him back in his crate. As with all training, repetition helps to speed the process along, so if you can take some time to work with the puppy with regard to being closed in his crate several times through the day for the first few days it will quickly learn what is expected. Start with short periods of between five and ten minutes in the crate and gradually lengthen them to an hour or so. As stated earlier, if he falls asleep simply let him be until he wakes up and then get him outside – by picking him up and carrying him outside – again before allowing him freedom in the house.

### **Pup's first night**

Whether you have had the pup throughout the day and followed the steps above or just arrived home from the breeders with the pup, before you head off to bed try to give the pup a good deal of play time to tire him out. Pick up his water dish about an hour before bedtime to avoid having him fill his bladder. Take him outside to potty and do your best to make certain that he has relieved himself before placing him in the crate. Setup a place in your bedroom where you can put the crate. I like it right next to the bed so that I can reach over and reassure the pup that I am there if need be. If he whines, simply reach in the crate with your fingers and reassure him that all is well. If he is truly tired, he will settle quickly and go to sleep but if not, you may lose a bit of sleep that night until he does. Just understand that his sleep cycle is likely to be similar to yours and triggered by things like darkness and quiet. So, turn out the lights and do your best to establish a peaceful rest area for him to relax.

Puppies are much like babies; a young one is not going to sleep through the night without having to do its business. In anticipating this you should set an alarm to go off four hours after going to bed. When the alarm goes off get up, quickly dress, and carry the pup from the kennel right

outside to potty. Once you are sure he is done doing his *business* bring him back in the house directly to his kennel. Close the door and go back to bed. He should settle back down in short order and go back to sleep but if not follow the same routine as was described earlier. At this point the pup should be able to sleep through to morning.

One of the benefits of having the pup's crate next to the bed or, at least, in the same room with you is that you can hear the pup if it fusses during the night indicating that it has to potty. When this happens quickly get the pup outside and follow the above routine. If the puppy should happen to potty in his crate do not scold or otherwise reprimand it. The fault likely lies with you and not the puppy anyway (maybe you did not set the alarm or did not make certain that he pottied before going to bed) but, additionally, he is not going to understand just what it is he is being scolded for. Simply take him outside to make certain he can fully relieve himself and then clean up the crate. If it is not yet morning, put him back in the crate and return to bed.

Within a very short time, usually just a few days, the pup will have adjusted to this routine. As the puppy ages you will find that it can go longer and longer without having to go outside during the night. I normally add an hour for every week of age beyond the age of eight weeks. So, by the time the pup is ten or eleven weeks old it is sleeping through the night.

### **Leaving the pup behind**

Of course, the time will come when you have to leave the pup in his crate at home and alone. If you have taken the time to follow this introduction to crate training and have a normal mentally sound pup you will probably find that this transition goes smoothly. Still, here are some steps to take that will help the process along. As with the nighttime routine, make sure that the pup has had plenty of opportunity to potty before being placed in his kennel and that his water was picked up about an hour before hand. Make his first few stints alone short periods of only two or three hours. If you have to go to work and will be gone for the entire day try to hire a neighbor or friend to stop by to let the puppy out for a potty break, a bit of a drink, and some exercise. Ask that the neighbor do this about every three to four hours and be sure to go over all the steps with the neighbor. If you can't get a neighbor to help try making arrangements to come home for lunch and take care of the puppy. Let the pup get a drink during these exercise periods but do not let him fill up too much. Do all you can to avoid having the pup soil his kennel lest you create a

situation where this becomes the norm. Finally, you may want to let your neighbors know that you are training a new puppy and not to be alarmed at some whining or barking for the first few days. This is normal and continues until the pup grows use to the routine.

One way to avoid a whining or barking pup is to be sure to get it sufficient exercise prior to crating. No one said that crate training or raising a puppy was going to be without some added commitments on your part so you will need to adjust your routine accordingly. You will find that if you can take the time to walk the pup, play with it in the backyard, do some training, and so forth for at least twenty minutes before you crate it for an extended period two things will happen. The first is that it will likely be sure to potty and the other is that it will tire itself out enough to settle down quickly once in its kennel.

As was discussed earlier, the crate becomes the dog's den, his sanctuary from all that goes on about him. When you dog is not being kept in his crate, leave the door to it open so that he can has ready access to it. One day, after the pup has grown older and matured a bit you will find that he has snuck away to his kennel for a bit of rest and relaxation. You will now understand that the pup has come to fully accept this crate as his den and that you are well on your way to having content companion.