

Dogs In Crates- Cruel Or Natural
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com
Copyright ABA, Inc.

Many people make use of “crates” or portable kennels to house their dogs. Many dog experts and veterinarians recommend crating as a way to house train puppies or to prevent destructiveness by dogs. However, there is still much confusion about crating. Some people have argued that since dogs are evolved from wolves that make use of dens in the wild, that crates are just artificial dens and that dogs are happy to be in them. Others see crates as small jails and believe that it is cruel to use them. Where does the truth lie?

As with most things, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Crates themselves are neither cruel nor natural, but the way people use them can be cruel or can be helpful for dogs. The idea that dogs instinctively like crates because they are a “denning” species isn’t quite true. Yes, wild wolves are usually born in dens that the mother finds or excavates, but the pups don’t spend all their time in the den. The older they get the less time they spend in the den. Adult wolves, other than mothers with pups, rarely use dens. Thus dogs don’t seem to have a natural love of crates or other small places where they may be kept.

On the other hand, dogs don’t automatically view crates as prison. Dogs that have been properly acclimated to staying in crates can be perfectly comfortable in them and show no obvious signs of distress. The trick is in getting them comfortable in being in crates. It can take several days to several weeks of gradual exposure to a crate to make a dog comfortable in one. Associating the crate with positive things such as food treats or having meals in the crate also can help.

How long the dog should be left in the crate is another important issue. Dogs left in crates too long can suffer from lack of exercise as well as lack of social contact with other dogs or the family. This certainly can become cruel if the crate is over-used. How long is too long? No one can say with certainty, but we know that most dogs can’t hold their need to eliminate longer than about six to eight hours at a time. Dogs left in crates longer than this need breaks from the crate to stretch, exercise and eliminate. Some people argue that they need breaks more often than this. Common sense tells us that a dog spending 16 to 20 hours a day in a crate day after day will have difficulty developing the social skills to become a good pet. Clearly there may be exceptions to these guidelines such as a dog recovering from some illness that may need to be crated to help in her recovery.

Crates can help people housetrain their dogs and keep them out of mischief, but they have to be used wisely.