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Crate Training Basics

Suggestions to Assist with Separation Issues

by Mary Beck (lablean@wi.rr.com)

If you think your dog may have separation anxiety, please read Patricia McConnell's book – I'll Be Home Soon. It will help you clearly identify whether your dog really has separation anxiety or whether your dog is just being naughty while you are gone. Not all destruction is a result of separation of a dog from their people (their pack). Many times it's just a bored or under-exercised dog looking for a way to entertain his/herself or release pent-up energy when no human is there to tell them "No; you shouldn't be doing that." Remember, a bad habit is typically the result of the dog not being told their actions are unacceptable. If they destroy something, and no one is there to tell them "No" while they are doing it, they think it's okay. They need to be caught in the act and told "No".

The following is intended to help with crate training and dealing with dogs who just don't like being left behind. If, after reading I'll Be Home Soon, you determine that your dog has "separation anxiety" rather than "just doesn't like being left behind," you should consult with a Dog Trainer or Behaviorist who has experience dealing with separation anxiety.

Crating and crate training your dog is the best way to provide a safe and secure environment for them while you are gone. Let's face it; they cannot destroy furniture or chew up your new shoes if they are in their crate. Work on crate training your dog no matter what age they are. It comes in handy for so many things outside your home – travel, staying with pet sitters, staying in a motel, riding in a car. It's the safest environment you can provide for your dog when you cannot be with them or attend to them. And, since dogs are den animals by nature, they want a place to call their own – their den. Whether it's on your bed, under or on your couch, or in the corner behind some curtains, they will find a spot to call their own – their den. Why not channel that energy and desire into a safe and comfortable spot – their crate?!

Dogs are also pack animals by nature. They want to be with you, their pack members all the time. They don't understand that you need to go to work to pay for their food, treats, toys and Veterinary care; they just feel that they should be able to go along. They travel in packs in the wild and do everything together. Now they are domesticated and in your home, but they still want to be part of a pack and be with their pack. Unfortunately, many of us have to work for a living and leave our dogs for periods of time. It is therefore very important to get your dog to understand that this is normal, no big deal and a totally acceptable part of their life. With dogs that have been re-homed, it may take some additional work and practice to get them comfortable with your absence because they've lost their previous pack(s) and don't want to see it happen again. They're not going to let you get away from them this time!! So, due diligence is very important in this area. Make them feel comfortable without you. You may love the fact that they want to be with you all the time and follow you around like a Velcro dog, but keep in mind this is not the sign of a well-adjusted dog, and our job as dog owners and lovers is to help our dogs be healthy, happy normal dogs. A happy, well-adjusted dog should be confident enough that they want to be with you but comfortable being alone and entertaining his/herself in a safe and respectful manner.

Now that you understand basic dog mentality, onto ideas for crate training and preventing or working with separation issues –

- 1) **To start** crate training a dog I would suggest you first use a vari-kennel type crate. These are the plastic crates. They provide a better den-like environment for a dog than the metal crates. They are also safer and more secure for a dog “in training” for crating. (If you use a metal crate, you may want to place a towel or rug over it to “enclose” it more, but make sure it is bulky or rigid enough that the dog cannot pull the towel or rug into the crate through the openings; you don’t want your dog to start a bad habit that you’ll have to correct.)

To initiate crate training, start by leaving the door open, throw some yummy, yummy treats into the crate towards the back and give your dog a command like “Kennel” or “Kennel up” to signify that you want them to go into the crate. (It may help to reserve these especially yummy treats only for times when they go in their crate.) If they go in immediately, eat the treats and come back out, you are on your way to crate training your dog, and you can use this method each and every time to get your dog to go into their crate (at least initially – later on, you won’t need a treat to entice them every time). Be sure to praise them when they go into the crate.

If, on the other hand, the dog still really does not want to go into the crate in spite of the yummy treats in there, try making a trail of treats leading to the back of the crate, or try gently coaxing your dog into the crate. Either way, don’t give in. It may be a waiting game, but the dog needs to understand that resistance is futile. A word of caution: don’t physically force your dog into the crate. If gently coaxing them doesn’t work, use the trail of treats to lure them in and just wait for them to follow the trail.

Remember to give the “Kennel” or “Kennel Up” command in a happy upbeat voice so the dog thinks going into their crate is a good thing. **Make sure you praise the dog for going into their crate** in either scenario. Let them come back out right away if they feel the need to do so. Practice this exercise numerous times leaving the door open. You can also put a Squirrel Dude, Kong or other durable dog chew toy in their crate stuffed full of yummy treats, again reinforcing that going into the crate is a good thing.

- 2) **Kennel your dog.** Once they appear to be comfortable with going into the crate, you are ready for the next step: shutting the door. For this step, you should use one of those long-lasting, yummy treats (like a stuffed Squirrel Dude or Kong). “Kennel” your dog, and shut the door. Initially, you should stay in the room. Praise them when they are quiet/good, even if it’s only for a few seconds. Gradually increase their time in the crate, again praising them when they are quiet and good. Do not let your dog out of the crate if he/she is fussing or barking. They have to learn to be quiet and calm to be released, even if it is just for a second or two. Many dogs will lie down and enjoy their treat. So feel free to let them stay for a longer period of time sooner if this is the case. Continue to practice crating for longer periods of time while you are in the room, leave the room, go outside in the yard, go on a short trip to the store, etc. to build the dog’s tolerance up to a level that will allow you to leave for a longer period of time.

Always remember, your dog should not be released from the crate if barking or fussing. Even if they are quiet for a few seconds, that is the time to release them. You do not want them to think

that the only way they can get out of their crate is by barking or having a fit. You may also want them to go into an immediate sit when coming out of their crate. That way, you'll have a calmer dog to deal with, and they will be in a position for you to hook up their leash and take them immediately outside to eliminate. Let them out of their crate; ask them to sit; attach their collar and/or leash; and take them outside to do their duty.

Other tips for crate training:

- ✓ Practicing for 5-10 minutes many times per day with breaks in between is much easier and more rewarding for the dog than longer drawn out practice sessions. If you draw out the training session for too long a period of time, dogs will often get tired, bored and confused.
- ✓ Using the proper crate size is also important. The dog should be resting while in their crate so provide a size that allows them enough room to go in, turn around and lay down stretching from the door to the back of the crate.
- ✓ Feeding a dog in their crate by hand through the door and then putting their food dish in the crate and feeding them in there with the door closed is also a very great way to get a dog acclimated to their crate and enjoy being crated. Try to associate good things like food with being in their crate. It's also a very good pack-leadership exercise.

- 3) **Leaving your dog:** Taking your dog on a good, long or shorter, more vigorous walk before crating is highly recommended. Walks, as opposed to other forms of exercise, help to physically and mentally tire a dog. A controlled walk (with your dog's shoulder either next to your hip or behind you) is a good mental exercise and sets the stage for the rest mode – crate equals rest mode. Be sure to allow your dog time to hydrate and relieve his/herself after their walk and before crating.

Do not leave anything in the crate that could break into little pieces and become a choking object.

No rawhides. Rawhides should never be given unless you can supervise your dog, in case the rawhide gets stuck in their throat.

Other tips:

- ✓ Don't leave water in a bowl on the floor of the crate where it can spill or be used to play in. There are small water bowls available that attach to the side of the crate. You should leave just enough water to satisfy any thirst from the treats left in the crate but not enough so your dog will need to relieve his/herself before you return. (You don't want to create a housebreaking problem.) If you're not going to leave a water bowl, be sure your dog has a chance to hydrate after any exercise and before crating.
- ✓ Be sure to give your dog plenty of opportunity to relieve him/herself before crating.
- ✓ Leave the radio or TV on when you're gone. The noise is good company and helps drown out outside stimuli.

- 4) **Treat leaving and returning to your dog as a normal everyday occurrence.** Do not make a big deal of either. Tell your dog "have a nice day," "be good," and/or "see you in awhile" and walk out the door. Do not look back, give them tons of kisses, tell them you'll miss them or make a big deal when you leave or when you come home. These actions will create anxiety and stress in your dog and make them not want you to leave. Coming home is part of leaving; too much excitement here makes them anticipate/dread the preceding separation as the two are linked.

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- 5) Look for cues or warning signs that your dog is stressed or anxious with your impending leave - reactions to you getting dressed for work, using the hair dryer, getting your keys, your purse, your coat. They may associate any or all of these things with being left behind so you may have to practice doing all of these things and then stay home. This is desensitizing the dog to things you typically do before you leave them. It kind of confuses them and prevents them from anticipating the leave because now you are doing these things and staying home. It is also very important to remember that you should crate your dog not only when you are leaving, but also for periods of time when you are home – for example - an hour or two at night when you need to get something done around the house or when you need to go outside and do some yard work. Practice crating them when you are in the same room, when in different rooms around the house where they can hear you but not see you. Also, practice crating when you are just outside for short periods of time. Crating should be an anytime event, not just a leaving event. Don't let them have any reason to feel anything you do is ONLY associated with you leaving them behind.

Every dog progresses at a different rate. If your dog already really has an issue with a crate or with you leaving, it may take many more repetitions over a longer time frame to get your dog comfortable with each stage of crate training. The most important thing to remember is that it is NORMAL to leave your dog behind at times. Do not feel guilty and try to compensate for this. The dog just interprets your emotions and actions as "something really bad must be coming because my master is nervous or stressed; I should react accordingly." Try to get your dog accustomed to your schedule and life style as quickly as possible when bringing them into your home. Do not feel sorry for them and spend 2 weeks home with them initially only to leave them high and dry, alone all day when it's time for you to go back to work. This is also very important to remember if you are a teacher or student and are home for the summer months. Leave your dog and crate them as practice for your normal life style the other 9 months of the year.

If your lifestyle changes (for example, you haven't been working but decide to get a part- time job) remember that you need to work with your dog ahead of time to practice your new upcoming routine and get them acclimated to the change. Dogs are very much creatures of habit and function better with a routine and schedules. Practice with your dog and get them prepared for your routine, your schedule and your lifestyle. Do not mold yourself and your life completely around them. Remember, the best environment you can provide is a healthy, happy and normal life for your dog as a DOG.