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Crate Training

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(Minor editorial changes by E. Sell for the health web page)

Crates tend to be a rather emotive topic still because some people tend to view them as doggy jails. Those who espouse them however, prefer to view them as doggy dens, places where dogs can escape from the hubbub of family life to feel safe and secure in their own little space. I think that how the dog views them tends to be a reflection of the owner's attitude. My dogs go into theirs quite happily whether I tell them to go or it's their own decision, but then I think crates are an essential if you're going to have dogs and keep your sanity.

Training the puppy. My puppies start their crate training at the tender age of approximately four weeks. That's when they start escaping from the whelping box and are relegated from my bedroom to the dog room, at least when no-one is home. The dog room is about sixteen feet by sixteen feet, and the floor is painted concrete. In said room, amongst all the toys, activity items and large, whelping-box size doggy diaper for pees and poops, are a couple of airline style dog crates, with fake sheepskin bedding and lots of bones. They don't have tops and make cozy places to crash. When pups hit six weeks or so the lid goes on first one then both crates. Pups still crash there happily. About age seven weeks, depending upon maturity, one night pups are divided into groups of about four, and the gates of the crates are shut for the night. As the day for departure approaches, pups are kept in progressively smaller groups until they are the sole occupant (not counting bones and toys) of their crate. For the first night they're alone I'll usually put them in a smallish airline crate, but by the time they depart to their new homes they'll have spent nights alone in larger airline and open wire crates. If new owners want, a pup will sleep with an item of bedding which can accompany them to their new home, or if the logistics work in their own crate which will go home with them. I have found that by seven weeks, the puppies can sleep eight hours in their crates without accidents, and are well started for crate living at their new homes. Most owners tell me crying is either non-existent or minimal that first night, which is good, because one whimper the first night may be enough to convince ambivalent owners they really don't want to go the crate route.



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Training later. If your puppy or older dog has not been crate trained from very early on, all is not lost. Some owners can put the new puppy in a crate, and with creative use of space and/or ear plugs make it through the first couple of nights, which is generally all it takes for a puppy to realize it's not going to get out of the crate, and accept its fate. Older dogs tend to be more resistant, and determined, and I have seen quite a number of mangled plastic crates. Given the time and circumstances, gradually introducing the crate works better and is less traumatic for all participants.

Don't shut the door at first, let the dog come and go freely (dens don't have doors). For some older dogs it's necessary to start with the top off the crate. Make the crate inviting, with soft cozy bedding (one of my puppy owners bought factory remnants of polar fleece; Piper was one very comfy pup), and lots of chew toys. Feed the dog his meals and give him treats when he goes into the crate. The first time you do shut the door, make sure he's comfortably settled, and leave it closed for only a short time. Praise and play with your dog in the crate. Don't use the crate as a place you put the dog to punish it, and don't just use it when you are going to leave - these will give the crate negative connotations for your dog. Don't place the crate in a busy area, put it in a quiet place. Don't leave puppies in crates all day and expect them to return to them again at night. If you have a puppy, play with it and interact with it.

Make sure when you buy the puppy a crate that it'll be large enough for him to stand up and turn around in when he grows up. Most bearded collies do well in a 400. With small puppies you may want to place a box or something in the back of the crate so it doesn't seem too big to him. Don't put papers in the crate for the puppy to use, you don't want him to think he can potty in his crate.

Crates help stop problem behaviors before they happen and certainly before they become established. Puppies in crates can't chew your new dress shoes, the front door, or grandma's antique chair. Puppies rarely potty in crates, (its terribly *infra dig* to pee in one's den). Crates are the safest places for dogs to travel, be it in a car or plane. If you go on a trip, it's the dog's home away from home at a hotel or strange house. However, if your older dog flips out at the mere sight of one, it probably reflects earlier negative experiences with crates, and it is probably better to find some other way to contain your dog rather than forcing the issue.



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Potty training: First realize that it is you and not Fluff Ball who is being trained. Pups need to go outside: after meals, after naps and after games, every time, plus first thing in the morning and last thing at night. When they go, praise them, give them a command as you take Fluff to the designated toilet area, Barbara Woodhouse espoused "Hurry Up" and I like "Let's Go". The choice is up to you, just imagine some of the circumstances you may have to use these commands in before you decide. Keep the toilet picked up. Once Fluff goes, lavish him with praise, treats, and then engage in a good romp with him, so he can get good and tired and go in and nap. In our clinic we have a saying, "A tired dog is a good dog." Sharper Image say something like "he can't sleep and chew at the same time" it sort of boils down to the same concept. After eight accident free weeks, gradually reduce your vigilance, and you - oops Fluff - should be housebroken. (This routine works with old dogs which have never been properly housebroken too.)

Avoiding separation anxiety: Hopefully you had a couple of blissful settling in weeks with Fluff before you had to head back to work. During that time, you will have practiced short departures (you had to go and buy food after all). Again, don't expect to leave the puppy in the crate all day and all night. He should have at least one hour long visit during the day for romping, feeding and cuddle time, preferably more, lots more. Put Fluff quietly and without fuss in his crate about 5-10 minutes before you go. Spike his crate, hide bits of kibble or other delicacies in the folds of his bedding so he can play hide and seek. Other goodies include Kong toys or hollow sterilized real bones in which you stuff peanut butter or Cheez whiz mixed with kibbles (not too much of the rich stuff, we don't want Fluff getting diarrhea). Don't say long and passionate good-byes, off you go with never a backward glance. Leave Fluff in his crate for about 5 - 10 minutes after you come in, then without greeting him much (I know he's a Beardie), outside to potty. Then, and only then, engage him in a happy game, and tell him what a wonderful and clever Beardie he is.

One final warning, don't leave collars and or leashes on dogs in crates, they can get hung up on the former, and eat the latter - I know, someone who should have known better once left one of my Beardies in her crate in both collar and leash - that's 6' long braided leather leash with brass snap - ten minutes later when she returned there was only the brass snap.