Crate Training

Why Use a Crate?
Following is some information designed to help you decide if you need to use a crate or some other form of confinement for your dog.

Crate training helps with the following:
1. Housetraining (less likely to soil crate)
2. Chew training (not able to access forbidden chew items)
3. Settling down (gets used to having quiet time)
4. Preparation for possible close confinement (vet, boarding, traveling)

Chewing and activity management could be accomplished with an ex-pen or a well dog-proofed room, and are a viable alternative, although a crate is really a better all around tool. Also, unless your dog is solid in his elimination habits, these options will not work for housetraining. The close confinement of a crate discourages a dog from eliminating because he prefers not to soil his living area.

For good housetraining, the crate should be only large enough for the dog to stand up, turn around and lie down in comfortably. Any larger, and he will be able to use one end as a toilet area and the other end as a bed; and this is what will happen with an ex-pen or dog-proofed room.

You may need to purchase a larger crate as your dog grows, but it is well worth the expense, considering you won’t be replacing shoes, furniture, etc. Another alternative is to block the back of the crate with a box or similar item and gradually make it bigger as the dog grows.

Getting Your Dog Used to the Crate
Throwing your dog into his crate and expecting him to adjust and like it is asking too much. You must make the crate a place your dog wants to go. Be sure the crate is comfortable, with a pad or blanket and put the crate in a high traffic area, so your dog will be close to people. Then, whenever the dog isn’t looking, drop treats in the back of the crate -- he’ll start thinking “Wow, whenever I go in my crate, there are goodies!” Feed him in his crate with the door open, tie one of his favourite chew toys to the back of the crate with heavy string so your dog must lie in the crate to chew on it.
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After you’ve done this for a few days, start teaching enter and exit cues (“house” and “free” are common cues), throw a treat in the crate, praise the dog as he goes in and then call and encourage him out, again praising and treating. Do this a few times and then change it slightly -- instead of throwing treats into the crate, cue him to go in, wait for compliance, and then drop in a treat. If he doesn’t go in on his own, just wait -- don’t cue him again, and don’t throw the treat in. If he doesn’t go in after waiting for a few minutes, end the session. Try another session in 15 minutes or so, still withholding the treat until he goes in on his own after one command. Have patience -- he’ll go in eventually. When he does, give him a jackpot -- double or triple the normal reward. Do a few more reps, and then end the session.

Once he’s going in and out on command, start locking the door. Shut the door and feed him treats through the grate for a minute or two, then open the door. After doing this several times, have him go in the crate while you walk around the crate, then around the room, pitching treats to him occasionally; then, after a couple of minutes, open the door and let him out.

Be sure the process is a positive experience for him. The next step is to add some duration. Prepare yourself with a video, stuff a couple of chew-toys with extra-good treats, and set the crate up close to where you’ll be sitting. Command the dog to go in the crate, give him his chew-toys, close the door and start your video. Leave a couple of times to get popcorn, etc., but only be gone for a minute or two. Ignore any noise or tantrum behavior from your dog. When you’ve finished your movie, if the dog is quiet and settled, open the door and command him out. Under no circumstances should you let the dog out if he’s misbehaving!

Don’t make a fuss over the dog when you let him out -- make it seem like the most natural thing in the world. All the good stuff should happen while he’s in the crate. After he’s out, command him back in the crate, give him a couple of treats with the door open, and then end the session. If he refuses to go in, do what it takes to get him in with food lures, etc. and work on your enter and exit commands before ending the session.

Next, begin locking your dog in his crate while you go about your normal household chores and are at home. Ignore any noise and make sure he has plenty to do while in the crate. Only let him out when he is settled and behaving properly.

Once he’s learned to settle into his crate, you can begin leaving the house for short periods. Start with 1-10 seconds over and over, and then increase it gradually until you are up to 5-10 minutes, etc. Mix it up so the dog doesn’t learn to anticipate how long you’ll be gone.

Don’t make a fuss when leaving or returning. If you are going to be gone for a longer period, tire your dog out with some strenuous exercise.
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It is important to gradually condition your dog to his crate so he will be comfortable and relaxed in a crate for the rest of his life.

If your dog is soiling his crate, try removing the pad or blanket for a week -- the porous material may be triggering elimination. Also be sure he isn’t in the crate for too long a period of time. Keep the dog and the crate scrupulously clean. You might also have him checked for a bladder infection if he urinates often. If this doesn’t help, call for advice.

If at all possible, do not crate your dog for more than 3-4 hours at a stretch without a break.