“Crates” can be airline carriers, pens or wire cages. As long as they are sturdy, provide ventilation, and are appropriate for the size of your dog, the crate can be an invaluable training tool.

However, the impact of using crates to raise puppies or solve behavior problems is overshadowed by the fact that crates will fix everything simply by restricting the dog’s ability to cause trouble. Using a crate to baby-sit your dog or lock the dog away from family activity is no way to solve problems for the long term.

**Myth: “Small Enclosed Spaces are Comforting to a Puppy because Wild Dogs Live in Dens.”**

While it is true that wild canines under 4 weeks old live inside their mother’s den, after the first month of life, puppies are free to leave the den at any time and usually are left with an older puppy or other female. Domestic dog puppies are born in homes, yards and barns and are not accustomed to small, close confinement of a wild dog’s den.

So a puppy has to be introduced to being alone gradually. Puppies are usually brought into a home when they are 8-12 weeks old. At this time they are naturally curious and very motivated to explore and learn about their environment. Their brains are just not wired to wait quietly all day in a box and then sleep 8 hours at night, too. A crate can be a terrific puppy management tool much like a crib can be used for a baby. But no one would put a baby in a crib and leave for 8 hours of work plus a commute. We shouldn’t do that to a puppy either.

**NOTE: Frequent confinement makes most behavior problems worse.**

Here are some myths and truths about crates, and some suggestions for how to utilize one to help solve existing problems without creating new ones.
Crate Training continued...

Myth: “A Crate will Housetrain the Puppy”
Puppies learn at about 6-8 weeks of age not to soil their mother’s bed. Mom gives them a stare or a rumbling growl and they scurry away. They don’t have sufficient control over their need to eliminate to wait more than the minute or less it takes to move out of mom’s range.

A puppy raised by his mom will want to keep his bed clean. (NOTE: Puppies raised in cages, either in stores or some large-scale breeders, often do not have this training.) You can use a crate to teach a puppy elimination control by putting him in the crate with an enjoyable toy when he is well exercised and ready to rest. If you are attentive, you can carry the puppy outside quickly when he gets active again. Rewarding your puppy when he eliminates outside will help him understand what you want him to do. If you leave the puppy in the crate for hours, he won’t know that he can keep his bed clean and the crate will cease to be a useful house training aid.

USING A CRATE SUCCESSFULLY

Don’t be in a hurry
» To introduce the crate to your puppy, begin by feeding your dog or puppy only in the crate for a few meals.

» During the day, the puppy should find food and toys in the crate. Once she enters the crate easily, start to latch the door.

» During this initial period, you want to try to avoid two things. One is scratching/whining to get out and the other is the feeling that he or she can’t get out.

» Gradually increase time in crate (5 minutes then 15 minutes then 10 minutes) while you are home, sometimes with food in the crate, sometimes with toys.

» Be sure that the time in the crate does not get consistently LONGER. You have to mix shorter time periods or puppy will see that it gets worse each time.

First night in the crate
» Keep the crate, with door open, in the kitchen during the day and in your bedroom at night. Have your puppy spend the night in the crate in your room. She’ll see you are asleep and she will copy you by sleeping too.

» For the puppy’s first night, put the crate near your bed and put your hand through the bars to soothe the puppy to sleep. Your hand through the bars will give her something to snuggle up to while she watches you sleep.

» If the puppy rustles around during the night, take her outside quickly to eliminate then back to the crate so she learns the nighttime routine.

Learning to spend time alone
» When you want to leave the puppy in the crate because you can’t supervise her directly, be sure she is fed and has eliminated so she won’t be uncomfortable.
Crate Training continued...

» You can use the crate for a few hours at a time once she is used to it.

» If you include a blanket for comfort use a chew safe type.

» It’s a good idea to remove any collar or tags so they don’t get caught on the crate.

MORE TIPS AND TRICKS
If your puppy is small, using a cat carrier that can be carried about the house from room to room as you work is a great way to make the crate less isolating.

Target training a puppy to enter and exit the crate is a fun game, too. Try tossing a treat in the crate and accompanying that action with a command like “kennel up!”

Though it can be hard to cope with the whining that is sure to accompany crate training, remember that you are actually doing your dog a big favor by helping her become accustomed to spending time in a crate. You can take the crate when you travel so she feels at home and your hosts will welcome her. She will be more comfortable at a veterinary hospital or at a kennel because she is used to staying in a confined space when necessary. If you ever have to move or take her on a plane, she won’t panic. It’ll be old hat. If you have a show dog, crate training is a must.

ALTERNATIVES TO CRATING
If you don’t want to crate train your puppy for whatever reason, there are alternatives.

Doggie daycare is a good option for puppies or dogs whose owners work long hours. Prices range from $5.00 per day to over $20.00, and some facilities offer obedience training and outdoor activities in addition to daycare. While more expensive than home care, daycare facilities allow people who work all day to adopt a puppy. Remember, most puppies will need this type of care until they are 6-8 months old.

If you walk your dog in your neighborhood you are likely to meet other dog owners that share your dog care concerns. See if you can share dog-walking responsibilities or “potty break” visits to make life easier on you and your pets.

For training during the day while you are home, some folks elect to use a tie down instead of a crate. A tie down is simply a leash that is too short to tangle, anchored to the floor or a wall in your home. Attach your dog to the tie down within reach of his comfortable bed. Introduce the tie down in the same manner as a crate. Food and toys should be within reach, and all good behavior should be rewarded. Gradually build up to longer periods of time spent confined until your puppy is comfortable with this restraint.

**NOTE: Never leave a dog unattended on a tie down.