

Free-Access Crate-Training for Cats

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If someone had told me ten years ago that I'd be advocating free-access crate-training for kittens and cats as I do for dogs, I would have laughed out loud. However, age, experience, and all those cats peeing and pooping all over the house made me change my mind. However, please note that I advocate free-access crate-training which means that the kitten or cat accepts his crate or carrier as his own, always available haven to which he can retreat when the going gets rough.

What do I mean by a crate? "Crate" is the generic term applied to fiberglass or plastic pet carriers which you can purchase in pet stores, department stores such as Wal-Mart or K-Mart, or from mail-order or online pet product suppliers. These typically break down into three parts – a top, bottom, and door – for easy cleaning. For cats, I prefer a crate big enough to hold the cat, bedding, food and water bowls, and a litter box of some sort if necessary. The litter box needn't be a full-sized one, but rather just big enough for the cat. (A cardboard box filled with litter will suffice in many cases.)

Why not use a cat bed or snug cat house for this purpose? While these work very well as feline retreats, I prefer carriers because these enable owners to contain the cat simply by closing the door of the crate if necessary. Most owners also find it much more convenient to wash the bedding used in a crate than to wash a whole cat bed; additionally, some cat houses aren't washable at all. Not only does a readily cleaned area help prevent disease, it makes it easier to keep the cat clean if problems do arise. It takes more time and energy to thoroughly clean up diarrhea in a carpeted cat tree or ornate cat bed than it does in an easily dismantled, scrubbed, and disinfected carrier.

Aside from this, I advocate free-access crate-training because of those three basic animal priorities:

- Establish and protect the territory
- Find food and water
- Reproduce

Animals who don't feel comfortable in their space only will eat and drink the bare minimum, and some won't eat or drink anything at all. And obviously cats who feel threatened don't get much in the way of rest. Not only do we know that this combination can lower an animal's resistance to any disease-causing organisms that may be floating around, studies indicate that reduced water consumption is the primary characteristic that differentiates cats who succumb to noninfectious urinary tract problems from those free of these troublesome conditions.

The reason I recommend crate-training kittens even though they seldom experience inappropriate elimination problems goes back to that solitary nature of theirs which leads feline's early experiences to become firmly entrenched.



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It appears that many cats develop a sense of how much personal space they need to feel comfortable at a young age and this may become difficult to alter as they get older. By introducing a kitten to a free-access crate that becomes his personal space and frees the animal from having to carve out a niche in any given environment.

Cats who accept their crates as their personal space gain five benefits:

1. They see the rest of the owner's home as a neutral territory or home range which greatly reduces their need to protect it.
2. Because they don't view the owner's home or part of it as their personal territory, they're less likely to become involved in territorial disputes (which may include marking as well as fighting) when/if the owner brings another cat into the household.
3. Wherever the crate goes, the cat's personal space goes with it. This can take a tremendous amount of pressure off the animal going to the veterinary clinic, kennel, moving into a new home, or visiting friends with the owner.
4. Crate-trained cats fare much better when fire, flood, or other natural disasters force their owners from their homes. Not only do these animals gain the security that the familiar space provides, the crates make it more likely that their owners will be permitted to keep them in any emergency shelter. If the owners can't, the crate will help comfort the animal away from the owner in strange surroundings.
5. It's much easier to teach children not to bother the kitten or cat when he's resting in his "house" than to teach them not to bother him when he gets "that look" or when he curls up in a corner of the couch. Like kids, kittens and cats need some down time, too, and a crate makes a safe and convenient place for them to get it.



How do you crate-train a cat? The kitten's natural curiosity often will lead it to explore any space that contains food, water, a few toys, and some sort of bedding. Placing the crate in a secure setting, such as the owner's bedroom, will further enhance its appeal. Many cats also prefer higher quarters, especially if other animals and young children populate the household, and putting the crate up on a bench or bureau will increase its attraction.



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Adult cats who associate their carriers with trips to the dreaded veterinary clinic require a bit more ingenuity. First, take a hint from where and on what the cat sleeps outside the crate and try to duplicate those conditions. Some cats prefer smoother textures while others opt for fuzzy bedding. Sometimes just putting the cat's bed or favorite bedding in the crate will do the trick. Other times, you must dismantle the crate and accustom the cat to only the bottom first, playing with, feeding, and otherwise positively interacting with the animal in this space to neutralize any previous bad associations. Once the cat accepts this, attach the top of the carrier and accustom the cat to it, too. Once the cat accepts both the top and the bottom, then add the door.

A synthetic facial pheromone (a very potent communicating hormone) called Feliway is now available which can hasten the process of crate acceptance in some cases. Because cats use the pheromone-laden secretions from their facial glands to communicate acceptance messages (as opposed to the warnings communicated by the pheromones in the urine during territory marking), adding this scent to a particular environment theoretically will neutralize any negative associations the cat has with it. I say theoretically because it depends on the cat. Although originally conceived as a deterrent for marking cats, I've found it more effective in neutralizing non-marking-related fearful associations cats have with crates, cars, and certain people. Spraying the substance on the suspicious object or on the hands of the suspicious person will help neutralize any negative feline feelings associated with that object or person.

While all of this may seem like a lot of work for cats who have no problems, it can save owners a lot of time and energy in the long run. Not only can giving cats their own secure space help prevent medical and behavioral problems, it greatly reduces the probability you'll be trying to crate-train a cat under problem conditions.

An often repeated truth about pets deserves repeating one more time: Preventing problems is always easier and less expensive than treating them.

— By Myrna Milani, BS, DVM



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