

Confinement Must Be Used Cautiously*

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Your dog Rover tears up the carpet and scratches the doors whenever there is a thunderstorm. Your aunt Carla tells you to confine him to a portable kennel. Your cat Fluffy is urinating on your fine Oriental rug. Your neighbor Sam tells you to keep her in the hall bathroom with her litterbox for two weeks to fix the problem. These sound like reasonable solutions to these problems, but do they really work? The answer is usually not. Let's see why.

First, confinement stops the damage only because you have taken away some of the animal's options. You have not addressed the underlying motivation for the destructive behavior. As long as the animal is still motivated, the destructive behavior will reoccur when the animal is released from confinement. Most people who have tried this approach will affirm that the results are only temporary.

Second, confinement can actually make some problems worse. Fears such as fear of thunderstorms, fireworks and separation anxiety seem to be made worse by close confinement. Highly fearful animals may become even more destructive trying to escape confinement and can hurt themselves in the process, breaking teeth, injuring jaws and paws.

Third, some people overuse confinement, sometimes to the point of cruelty. The argument goes that since dogs are descended from wolves, which are "denning" animals, confinement in a crate, kennel or other small area is natural and makes the dog feel more secure. This is then used as an excuse to confine the dog up to twenty hours a day.

The problem is that even denning wolves don't stay in the den twenty hours a day. Confined dogs need adequate exercise and time to socialize with family members. Social isolation in a small area for many hours a day can be considered cruel.

This is not to say that confinement is always cruel or a waste of time. When the confinement is properly used and the animal properly trained to the confinement area, it can be a safe, reliable way to manage an animal. When dealing with destructive or disruptive behaviors in animals, it is always more effective in the long run to identify the motivation for the behavior and then to change that motivation. Common causes include fears, boredom, play, teething, urine marking, incomplete house training, litterbox aversions as well as some medical problems. Identifying and changing motivations may take some time and effort on your part, and you may even need the help of your veterinarian or an animal behaviorist, but it is more likely to produce permanent resolutions to your problems.

*Since this article appeared, we've written a video program on using crates called "Crate Training The Right Way". It is available in your local PETsMART store – ask for it if you don't see it on the shelves.