

The Chronicles of Oliver—Part III—Confinement Issues

When Oliver first came to my house, he was a mess. He had been given Acepromazine earlier in the day in an attempt to groom him. He fought the medicine and only received a partial groom. Oliver was having a bad hair day, and the drugs caused him to walk crooked and look cross-eyed. This may have had something to do with my lack of instant love for the dog, although now that I walk crooked myself on a regular basis and am growing my hair out after a short hair cut, I do have more sympathy for his situation that day. The other reason for the lack of love may have also been due to his hiking his leg on my great-grandmother's table only minutes after relieving himself outside...five times. It was time to cook dinner, so I tossed some treats into a nearby crate and coaxed Oliver in and closed the door. The crate was located in the kitchen where he could see me, so I thought he'd be fine. The purpose of the crate was to protect my precious family heirlooms and my sanity. Well, the sanity part was not preserved. The minute the door of the crate was latched, Oliver started barking. Not just a, "Hey, I'm in here bark," but a blood-curdling screech usually heard in some horror movie. Great! One more thing to just bring that love pouring forth for this dog. I decided to ignore it for the moment and see if things improved. I knew that he had been at adoption events with the rescue group in the past, so certainly he was used crates. No one had mentioned that he couldn't handle them. Maybe there was good reason for that!

When Oliver began clawing and chewing frantically at the bars, it became clear that the crate would take a little work. I opened the gate and let him out before he hurt himself. I sat down on the floor wondering what to do with this funky looking poodle. While I was pondering my situation, Oliver climbed into my lap, curled up, and sighed the biggest sigh you ever heard, while thumping his tail. Darn it! Dogs always seem to know when to pour on the cute. Just when I was prepared to hate this dog, he had to go and do something like that. I was hooked and resolved to help this pathetic little creature.

We worked on his confinement issues over the next several months. The crate door was hooked open, and Oliver received all his meals in the crate. At first he stretched his body so he wouldn't have to put all four feet in the crate. I got out a bigger crate and put the dish far enough back that he had to step all the way in. He'd grab a mouthful and run back out. That was all right with me. The idea was he was going in the crate and learning that nothing bad happened. This went on until Oliver began to stay in the crate to eat his entire meal. He received treats in the crate, stuffed Kongs, and bones. Everything good came from the crate. We also shaped going into the crate to get treats. Every time he entered the crate on his own, I tossed him a treat. I sat and read a book near the crate so I could watch his movements. I didn't coax him in the crate; I waited until he did it on his own, and then gave a treat. Soon he figured out entering the crate meant getting a treat, and he repeated it over and over. After a while I put the word "crate" to the action. Soon the crate became less scary. It was time to start shutting the door. The first time the door was shut, it was only for a few seconds. Treats were fed through the crate bars while the door was being shut and the whole time it was closed. Instantly the door was opened and treats rained from heaven into the crate. This was repeated, each time keeping the door shut for a little longer. Eventually Oliver worked up to being in the crate for longer periods of time with me visible. After a year of training, Oliver is quiet in a crate when I'm present, and will remain quiet for a short period when I leave. I confess to not spending enough time working on crate training to know how long I can actually leave him before panic sets in. There have been so many issues to work on, this part of his training stopped at getting him used to being in the crate while I was working, as that was what I needed to accomplish for the time being. That doesn't mean I won't revisit the training at a future date.

You might ask why even work on confinement issues. I think it's important for dogs to get used to being in a crate. Imagine you are called away on an emergency and can't get someone to come to your home to care for your dog. The dog will have to go to a kennel, and if the dog has confinement issues, this could be a major problem. What if the dog becomes ill and needs to be left at the veterinarian's office overnight? Again, confinement issues could make this difficult. Some hotels only allow dogs if they are in a crate. With Oliver, I knew that I would be taking him places with me, and would need to crate him to keep him safe while I conducted other business. Oliver has met this goal. Later I'll focus on expanding it, but for now we'll revel in the glory of successfully leaping over one more hurdle in Oliver's rehabilitation process.