



CRATE TRAINING YOUR DOG

What is crate training, and why should I do it?

Crate training involves teaching your dog to rest or sleep in a box-shaped metal or plastic enclosure when you're not around to supervise him. The crate acts as a management tool, preventing your dog from doing all kinds of "illegal" stuff—like eating your shoes, tearing down your curtains, de-stuffing your couch and getting into the garbage. It's also extremely useful when housetraining your puppy or adult dog. Crates are great!

But I can't put my dog in a CAGE!

Remember that dogs' ancestors lived in dens, so dogs do naturally tend to like small, enclosed areas to call their own. It *is* important to be sure to associate the crate with good things that your dog already likes (food, comfy bedding, etc.), rather than just chucking him into one and leaving him there for hours, right after bringing it home—but if you help your dog learn to love his crate, it can be a great thing for you both.

What kind of crate should I get—and how big should it be?

There are two types of crates: plastic crates, which are sometimes used for airline travel, and pen-like metal crates. Metal crates usually collapse for easy storage and portability, and they provide a bit more ventilation than plastic ones. Plastic crates, on the other hand, seem especially den-like and may make dogs feel safer and more secure when they're inside. Choose whichever style appeals to you and your dog. Some companies also make fabric, soft-sided crates, but these aren't usually sturdy enough to contain a dog in the absence of his owner. They are very convenient for travel, however, so after you've crate trained your dog, you can use a soft-sided crate for temporary confinement on the road, when you're around to supervise.

When trying to determine how big a crate to buy, think cozy. It should be big enough to allow your dog to turn around, lie down and sit comfortably when he's inside it—but no bigger. Unless they've been forced to spend the majority of their time and eliminate in very tiny, confined spaces, most dogs will avoid urinating and defecating where they sleep, eat and hang out. So if you set up an appropriately sized crate for your dog, he probably won't relieve himself when he's in it.

How do I introduce my dog to his new crate?

Many trainers and behavior experts recommend acclimating your dog to his new crate very gradually, over a period of a week or two. However, when most people buy crates, they do so for a reason. Housetraining and destructive behavior are two of the most common ones. Folks dealing with these behavior problems—or just folks who want to set their dogs up to succeed by crate training them BEFORE they start to form bad habits, like eliminating indoors and destroying stuff when left alone—need to use crates almost immediately. That's why we've created a fast-track crate training plan, which will allow you to make use of your new crate as soon as you bring it home with you.

To boil it down, there are two main things to keep in mind when starting to use a crate to confine your dog:

1. **You should work as hard as you can to make sure your dog associates his crate with things he loves.** *Wonderful* things should happen to your dog when he's inside it. We'll explain how to achieve that below.
2. **You should NEVER let your dog out of the crate if he's making noise in it.** If your dog barks or whines in the crate at any point, ignore him completely. Wait until he quiets down for at least a minute or two before letting him out. Avoid banging on the crate or yelling at him to stop vocalizing, as doing that will usually make canine "complaining" worse. If you DO give in and let your dog out of the crate when he's yowling at you, you'll inadvertently reinforce that behavior. Next time, he'll yowl louder and longer. Instead, be patient and wait until your dog stops barking and whining before you let him out of his crate. Buy some earplugs and bake your neighbors a cake if you need to. 😊

Setting Things Up

Before you start using a crate to confine your dog, you'll need to do a bit of prep work.

- If possible, put the crate in room where you spend lots of time. You can choose an area like a den or living room, or you can put the crate in your bedroom if you plan on having your dog sleep inside it at night.
- If your dog doesn't rip up soft material, put a blanket, towel or dog bed in the crate to make it more comfortable and welcoming. You can also put a soft shirt that smells like you into the crate, which may soothe your dog when he's alone in it. Plant some of your dog's favorite toys in the crate as well.

Getting Started on Day One: The Crate Game

- After you set up your dog's new crate, encourage your dog to go into it by saying a cue, like "Kennel up," and then tossing a couple of treats inside. If your dog is reluctant to go into the crate at first, be patient. Repeat the treat-tossing game until he eagerly rushes in to get his prize. This may take anywhere from 5—25 reps. Do not try to close the crate door just yet.
- When your dog zooms happily into his crate to collect the treats you toss into it, change the game a little. Now, when your dog runs into the crate to get the treats you toss in, close the crate door. After you do, feed your dog a few goodies through the crate door and then open it to let him out. Repeat about 25 times, continuing to feed your dog treats whenever he's in the crate. Vary the time that your dog must stay in the crate with the door closed. The first time, he has to stay in there for only 2 seconds. The second time, keep the door closed for 10 seconds. (Don't forget to continue delivering treats every few seconds.) The third time, keep the door closed for 5 seconds. The fourth time, keep the door closed for 20 seconds. Then try 30. Then go back to 8. Then go for a minute. Then go for 10 seconds again. Then try 2 minutes, with you walking around the room and going back to the crate every 15 seconds or so to deliver treats. Get the idea?
- Play the Crate Game multiple times throughout the day when you bring the crate home. Each training session can last 3—5 minutes at first. As your dog gets more and more comfortable going into the crate, increase the time that he's in there with the door closed, building up to about 30 minutes or so. Again don't forget to deliver treats periodically while he's in his crate! When you build up to as long as 5 minutes, one of the "treats" you deliver can be a tasty chew bone or a stuffed Kong for your dog to work on inside the crate. (A Kong is a hollow, rubber toy that you can fill with treats or food. Ask us if you'd like to know where to get one.)
- Be sure to praise your dog and deliver the goodies only when he's IN the crate. Don't celebrate when he comes out. Remember, in order for your dog to associate his crate with good things, they need to happen *inside* the crate.
- If your dog whines or barks while in the crate, remember: DO NOT let him out until he quiets down for at least a minute or two.

Starting to Use the Crate

Now that you've introduced your dog to his new crate, you'll be able to effectively manage his behavior. Put him into the crate with some safe, indestructible toys and things to chew whenever you can't actively supervise him, at night when you're asleep, and/or when you leave him at home alone. If he's in his crate, he won't spend his time "redecorating" your house or eliminating indoors. You can also use a crate to transport your dog in a car or to confine your dog when you take him to any place where he can't run around freely.

Bedtime

Make sure you give your dog an opportunity to eliminate right before bedtime. After he's gone out and emptied himself, give your dog his cue to go into the crate and toss in a few treats. When your dog goes in, close the crate door behind him. As we mentioned above, if your dog vocalizes, it's important to resist the urge to let him out—AND resist the urge to tell him to be quiet. Just ignore him. When he barks and whines in the crate, he's invisible. It may take a few days for your dog to get used to sleeping in his new digs, but if you stick to the plan, he will.

If you're using a crate to house your young *puppy* overnight, refer to the information below about how often he may need to go out, according to his age. If he can't sleep through the night without needing to eliminate, you'll need to plan to wake up and let him out to relieve himself. In this case, if your puppy whines in the middle of the night and you think he may need to go out, DO let him out of the crate. Take him directly to the place you'd like him to eliminate and wait. If he doesn't go within a minute or two, take him back inside and return him to his crate. Don't allow him to romp around during the "potty break." Until he develops bladder and bowel control, your puppy should be able to tell you when he needs to go out in the middle of the night—but you don't want him to learn that if he whines in his crate, you'll take him out for playtime!

Alone Time During the Day

In advance, prepare a Kong or other chew toy for your dog. When you're ready to leave him alone for a while, give him his cue to get into the crate, just like you've done before. When he goes in, hand him his chew thing, close the crate door and leave the house. You can leave a small amount of water or ice cubes in your dog's crate if you'd like to—but be sure to put liquid in spill-proof containers. (You'll find bowls made for use inside crates at most pet stores.) If possible, leave your dog home alone in his crate for 1—4 hours at first. (If you work during the day, you may be able to make a quick trip home during lunch to give your dog a chance to stretch his legs and eliminate outside.) After doing this for a couple of days, you can increase the time you leave your dog alone in his crate even more, depending on the age of your dog and how often he needs to go out.

How long can I leave my dog in his crate?

During the day, we recommend leaving your adult dog (6 months old and up) in his crate for a maximum of 6—8 hours. Overnight, most adult dogs can sleep without needing to eliminate for up to 8 hours. Puppies will need to go out more often:

- 4—8 weeks old: Your puppy will probably need to go out every 1—2 hours, but some may need to eliminate as often as a few times an hour until they develop bladder/bowel control.
- 8—12 weeks old: Your puppy will probably need to go out every 2—4 hours.
- 12 weeks—6 months old: Your puppy will probably need to go out every 4—6 hours.

Keep in mind that these are general guidelines and that every puppy is an individual. Some may develop bladder and bowel control more quickly than others. It's best, if you're not sure, to give your puppy *more* opportunities to eliminate than may be necessary, to avoid mistakes in the crate. (That's a habit you definitely don't want your puppy to develop!)

Important note: If you crate your dog when you're away during the day and again at night when you're asleep, you'll need to provide plenty of exercise and spend lots of quality time with him when he's not crated. Although crates make cozy canine "dens" and work well for managing your dog's behavior, you must make sure you're giving your dog frequent opportunities to interact with you and expend his physical and mental energy.

Additional Tips & Tricks

Here are some other clever ways to convince your dog that his crate is The Place to Be. We recommend employing the following ideas for as long as you use a crate to confine your dog.

- When your dog's not using his crate, leave the door open at all times, so he has the opportunity to curl up in it if he so chooses. Periodically, when your dog's not looking, put some of his favorite treats into the crate, so that he can discover them later on. If the crate becomes That Place Where Surprise Goodies Sometimes Magically Appear, your dog will probably like it a whole lot—and go into it often, just to see if the "Treat Fairy" has come. ☺
- Feed your dog all his meals inside the crate—but don't close the crate door at first. Just put your dog's bowl at the back of the crate, so he has to go inside to eat.
- Feed you dog all of his meals inside the crate. At breakfast and dinnertime, give your dog the cue to get into his crate and then put his bowl at the back of the crate, so he has to go all the way inside to eat.
- Make sure that you sometimes put your dog into his crate when you're around, so that it's not always a predictor of your absence. Try putting your dog into his crate for chew time. Give your dog something special—like a new chew bone or a Kong stuffed with something fabulous (a bit of peanut butter or cream cheese works well). (Say your cue, toss a couple of treats into the crate, if necessary, to get your dog to go inside, and then hand your dog the tasty item. Close the crate door and let your dog chew for 10—15 minutes. Then open the crate door, let him out and take the chew thing away. (He only gets the special item when he's inside the crate.) Sometimes you can hang out in the same room with your dog during in-the-crate chew time, say, if you're watching TV or reading. Other times, leave your dog alone in the crate to chew and go about your own business elsewhere in the house. If your dog won't work on a chew thing with the crate door closed at first, that's okay. Leave it open—but use heavy string or a rope to tie the tasty item to the back of the crate so your dog can't take it out of the crate and enjoy it somewhere else.
- Every once in a while, give your dog his cue to go into his crate. Then feed him some treats through the crate door. After he eats them, let him out immediately. The message: Even though your dog sometimes has to go into his crate for longer periods of time, when you're not around, at other times, the crate predicts nothing but a few delicious morsels and then freedom.

- Whenever you let your dog out of his crate, do so very calmly, with no ceremony. All good things happen to him when he's *inside* the crate, not when he comes out. You don't want this scenario: Mummy puts Rover into the crate, apologizing profusely. Then she leaves for work all day. When, at last, mummy comes home again, she rushes over to the crate and liberates Rover. The two dance around happily. THANK GOODNESS the crate-time is over.... Instead, go for low-key. Make your dog's entries and exits into and out of his crate seem like no big deal. You don't want your dog to realize that there's a huge, horrible difference between life when you're at home with him and life when he's alone in the crate.

Will my dog use his crate forever?

Many dogs love their crates, and some owners decide to continue to use them, even after their dogs don't need to be confined when alone. However, after your dog develops good habits, like chewing on his own toys (rather than yours) and going to the bathroom outside, you can gradually phase out the use of his crate if you'd like. At first, instead of leaving him in his crate, you can leave him in a dog-proofed room, making sure that the area you choose is free of things your dog could destroy and securely sectioned off from the rest of your house with doors, baby gates or an exercise pen. Bathrooms and laundry rooms are ideal for this purpose. To set your dog up to succeed when you leave him at home outside of his crate, give him plenty of his own toys, like stuffed Kongs and other chew things to keep him busy. If your dog can successfully stay in his dog-proofed confinement area without eliminating inside or chewing off-limits items, you can slowly increase his freedom, adding a new room to his roaming area every week or so. If you allow your dog access to other rooms in your house and he makes a mistake inside or destroys something he shouldn't, you've probably increased his freedom too soon. Go back to stricter supervision for a while.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with playing it safe and continuing to keep your dog in his crate when you can't supervise him. Just be sure to leave him with something tempting to chew on or play with while he's confined.

Resources

If you need additional advice about crate training, please call our **Behavior Helpline: (804) 643-SPCA**. We'd be happy to help. If you'd like us to help you choose a crate, feel free to come to our Lora Robins Gift Shop at the shelter for personal assistance.