

Crate Training

Crate training your dog may take some time and effort, but can be very useful in a variety of situations. If you have a new dog or puppy, you can use the crate to limit his/her access to the house until he/she learns all the house rules, e.g., what he/she can and can't chew on and where he/she can and can't eliminate. A crate is also a safe way of transporting your dog in the car, as well as a way of taking him/her places where he/she may not be welcome to run freely. If you properly train your dog to use the crate, he/she will think of it as his/her safe place and will be happy to spend time there when needed.

Selecting A Crate

Crates may be plastic (often called "flight kennels") or collapsible, metal pens. They come in different sizes and can be purchased at most pet supply stores. Your dog's crate should be just large enough for him/her to stand up and turn around in.

The Crate Training Process

Crate training can take days or weeks, depending on your dog's age, temperament and past experiences. It's important to keep two (2) things in mind while crate training. The crate should *always* be associated with something pleasant, and training should take place in a series of small steps - don't go too fast.

Step 1: Introducing Your Dog To The Crate

Put the crate in an area of your house where the family spends a lot of time, such as the family room. Put a soft blanket or towel in the crate. Bring your dog over to the crate and talk to him/her in a happy tone of voice. Make sure the crate door is securely fastened opened so it won't hit your dog and frighten him/her.

To encourage your dog to enter the crate, drop some small food treats near it, then just inside the door, and finally, all the way inside the crate. If he/she refuses to go all the way in at first, that's okay – *don't* force him/her to enter. Continue tossing treats into the crate until your dog will walk calmly all the way into the crate to get the food. If he/she isn't interested in treats, try tossing a favorite toy in the crate.

This step may take a few minutes or as long as several days.

Step 2: Feeding Your Dog His Meals In The Crate

After introducing your dog to the crate, begin feeding you're his/her regular meals near the crate. This will create a pleasant association with the crate. If your dog is readily entering the crate when you begin Step 2, put the food dish all the way at the back of the crate. If your dog is still reluctant to enter the crate, put the dish only as far inside as he/she will readily go without becoming fearful or anxious. Each time you feed him/her, place the dish a little further back in the crate.

Once your dog is standing comfortably in the crate to eat his meal, you can close the door while he/she is eating. At first, open the door as soon as he/she finishes his/her meal. With each successive feeding, leave the door closed a few minutes longer, until he/she is staying in the crate for ten minutes or so after eating. If he/she begins to whine to be let out, you may have increased the length of time too quickly. Next time, try leaving him/her in the crate for a shorter time period. If he/she does whine or cry in the crate, it is **imperative** that you *not* let him/her out until he/she stops. Otherwise, he/she will learn that the way to get out of the crate is to whine, so he/she will keep doing it.

Step 3: Conditioning Your Dog To The Crate For Longer Time Periods

After your dog is eating his/her regular meals in the crate with no sign of fear or anxiety, you can confine him/her there for short time periods while you are home.

Call him/her over to the crate and give him/her a treat. Give him/her a command to enter such as, “kennel up.” Encourage him/her by pointing to the inside of the crate with a treat in your hand. After your dog enters the crate, praise him/her, give him/her the treat and close the door. Sit quietly near the crate for five (5) to ten (10) minutes and then go into another room for a few minutes. Return, sit quietly again for a short time, then let him/her out of the crate. Repeat this process several times a day.

With each repetition, gradually increase the length of time you leave him/her in the crate and the length of time you are out of his/her sight. Once your dog will stay quietly in the crate for about thirty (30) minutes with you out of sight the majority of the time, you can begin leaving him/her crated when you are gone for short time periods and/or letting him/her sleep there at night. This may take several days or several weeks.

Step 4:

Part A/Cratering Your Dog When Left Alone

After your dog is spending about thirty (30) minutes in the crate without becoming anxious or afraid, you can begin leaving him/her crated for short periods when you leave the house. Put him/her in the crate using your regular command and a treat. You might also want to leave him/her with a few safe toys in the crate (see our handout: “Dog Toys and How to Use Them”).

You will want to vary at what point in your “getting ready to leave” routine you put your dog in the crate. Although he/she shouldn’t be crated for a long time before you leave, you can crate him/her anywhere from five (5) to twenty (20) minutes prior to leaving. Do *not* make your departures emotional and prolonged, but matter-of-fact. Praise your dog briefly, give him/her a treat for entering the crate and then leave quietly.

When you return home, do *not* reward your dog for excited behavior by responding to him/her in an excited, enthusiastic way. Keep arrivals low key. Continue to crate your dog for short periods from time to time when you are home so he/she doesn’t associate crating with being left alone.

Part B/Cratering Your Dog At Night

Put your dog in the crate using your regular command and a treat. Initially, it may be a good idea to put the crate in your bedroom or nearby in a hallway, especially if you have a puppy. Puppies often need to go outside to eliminate during the night, and you will want to be able to hear your puppy when he/she whines to be let outside. Older dogs, too, should initially be kept nearby so that crating doesn’t become associated with social isolation. Once your dog is sleeping comfortably through the night with his/her crate near you, you can begin to gradually move it to the location you prefer.

Potential Problems:

Too Much Time In The Crate

A crate isn’t a magical solution. If not used correctly, a dog can feel trapped and frustrated. For example, if your dog is crated all day while you are at work and then crated again all night, he/she is spending too much time in too small a space. Other arrangements should be made to accommodate his/her physical and emotional needs. Also remember that puppies under six (6) months of age should not stay in a crate for more than three (3) or four (4) hours at a time. They cannot control their bladders and bowels for longer periods.

Whining

If your dog whines or cries while in the crate at night, it may be difficult to decide whether he/she is whining to be let out of the crate, or whether he/she needs to be let outside to eliminate. If you followed the training procedures outlined above, your dog hasn't been rewarded for whining in the past by being released from his/her crate. Try to ignore the whining. If your dog is just testing you, he/she will most likely stop whining soon. Yelling at him/her or pounding on the crate will only make things worse. If the whining continues after you have ignored him/her for several minutes, use the phrase he/she associates with going outside to eliminate. If he/she responds and becomes excited, take him/her outside. This should be a trip with a purpose, not play time. If you are convinced that your dog doesn't need to eliminate, the best response is to ignore him/her until he/she stops whining. Don't give in, otherwise you will teach your dog to whine loud and long to get what he/she wants. If you've progressed gradually through the training steps and haven't done too much too fast, you will be less likely to encounter this problem. If the problem becomes unmanageable, you may need to start the crate training process over again.