



Crate Training for Your Dog or Puppy

Teaching your dog to happily spend time in a crate can get you some long-term benefits. A crate can be a part of house-training, chew-training, safe traveling, and medical recovery, to mention just a few. If you invest time in crate training at the beginning, your dog can end up with a safe, quiet, comfortable place to spend time when they need to be confined, or when they just want somewhere secure to hang out.

A crate can be a part of managing your dog's environment while they learn the rules of the house: where to eliminate, what they can chew on, and so on. Crate training doesn't replace any of the other things your dog needs, though, like attention, exercise, and training, so the amount of time your dog spends in the crate should be limited.

If crate training is done right--slowly, always positively, at your dog's pace--crates can be appropriate for most dogs. If your dog already has a negative association with crates or being confined, or if your dog suffers from true separation anxiety, you may need to be especially careful to introduce or reintroduce the crate very gradually and carefully to change their association. For more information about separation anxiety, see "Separation Anxiety."

Crate Basics

Be sure to choose the proper size crate: just big enough for your dog to stand up, turn around, and lie down comfortably. If you're getting a crate for a puppy, you can get one that will be the right size when they're full-grown. Many crates come with an extra panel that allow you to block off part of the crate while the puppy is small, and gradually expand it as the dog grows.

There are different styles of crates to choose from. Wire crates are often collapsible, and can be covered with a blanket or something similar if you want to make them snuggler or block your dog's view. Plastic crates with metal mesh like those used for air travel are more enclosed. Soft crates, often made of nylon, are appropriate for dogs who won't try to chew or dig their way out of them.

When you're looking for a place to have your dog spend time in their crate, consider that dogs are happiest when they feel like a member of their family, so an area where people spend time is best. The kitchen, the living room, or the bedroom if your dog will eventually be sleeping in the crate at night are good options.

Once your dog is crate trained, use good judgment about how much time they spend in a crate. A large adult dog can probably remain in a crate for eight hours without straining bladder and bowels; for a small dog or a puppy, the time may be considerably shorter. Use common sense and don't give them a big meal or a lot of water just before crating them.

Even if your dog has adequate bowel and bladder control for a long confinement, you'll want to think twice about leaving your dog crated for hours every day, especially if you crate them again at night.

Consider hiring someone to take them for a walk during the day, and make sure they get plenty of exercise in the evening when you come home.

If you must confine your dog all day (for instance, due to housetraining issues or destructive behavior) and there's nobody available to let them out while you're gone, it might be a better idea to confine them in a dog-proof room or a pen with puppy pads. It might take longer to housetrain them if you do this, but it's better than crating them for longer than they can tolerate.

Introducing Your Dog to the Crate

You want to start off right, making sure that all of your dog's experiences with the crate are good.

- ◆ Start with the crate door open. Secure it so that it doesn't startle your dog or close on them when you don't want it to.
- ◆ Gather some especially delicious small treats.
- ◆ Encourage your dog to investigate the crate by dropping a couple of treats just in front of it. Praise them gently when they do.
- ◆ When your dog is happily walking right up to the crate, start dropping treats just inside. Continue to praise.
- ◆ Work up to having your dog walk all the way into the crate.
- ◆ Once your dog is reliably going into the crate, you can add a cue if you want. For example, you might say "Kennel" in a happy tone of voice, then toss the treat into the crate and praise when they step in.

How long this stage takes depends on your dog; it may take a few minutes, it may take a few days.

Making the Crate a Preferred Place

When your dog is happily going into the crate on their own, with or without a cue, you can start working up to longer periods. You're going to continue to make sure that all of your dog's experiences with the crate are good ones; the crate should never be used to punish your dog.

- ◆ **Feed your dog their meals inside the crate.** Start off with the door open. After a few meals, begin to shut the door while they eat, and open it for them right away when they finish. As they get comfortable, you can progressively wait a little longer after each meal to open the crate.

Make sure to go slowly, and if you find that your dog is whining to get out, make a mental note that you went too far and back up a little at the next meal. Don't open the door while your dog is whining; wait for several seconds of quiet before you open the door. You want your dog to learn that being quiet in the crate is the way to get let out; you don't want to give them the message that whining makes the door open.

- ◆ **Give your dog good things to do in the crate while you're nearby.** Follow the guidelines above for feeding in the crate (start with the door open, and so on), but use food-stuffed toys or safe chews at different times of the day.

Working Up to Leaving Your Dog Alone in the Crate

Once your dog is happily going into the crate and spending a little time with the door closed while they eat or chew, you can move on to the next step.

- ◆ **Start with very short periods.** Have your dog go in the crate on cue or for a small treat. Praise as they enter, and shut the door. You can give your dog a filled Kong-type toy or chew toy, too. Sit down near the crate for a few minutes, then get up and go to another room for a few minutes. Come back, sit down near the crate again quietly for a few minutes. Then, as long as your dog is quiet, open the door.
- ◆ **Gradually lengthen the time you spend out of your dog's sight and hearing.** Follow the same process each time, but spend a little more time in the other room each time--not too much! If your dog gets anxious, you may have gone too fast, so for the next time, back up and try a shorter period again.
- ◆ **Follow your dog's pace.** Once again, this phase can take anywhere from a couple days to weeks.

When your dog can happily manage a half hour or so on their own in the crate, you can start to use it when you're going out or have your dog sleep in it at night.

Whining

It can be difficult to tell, when your dog whines in the crate at night, if they simply want to get out of the crate or if they need to be let outside to eliminate. You can deal with this by teaching the dog a phrase, such as "Do you need to go out?", that you use every time you let them out to eliminate. If you use this phrase with your crated dog and they respond by becoming excited, take them outside.

Make sure this is a trip with a purpose and not playtime. If you're convinced that your dog doesn't need to eliminate, your best response is always to ignore him until he quits whining. Don't give in, otherwise you'll teach your dog to whine loud and long to be let out.

Also, don't yell or pound on the crate to stop your dog from whining. This can create a negative association with the crate and make the problem worse.

For more information, see these additional Sacramento SPCA handouts:

- ◆ "Housetraining Your Adult Dog or Puppy"
- ◆ "Dog Toys and How to Use Them"
- ◆ "Separation Anxiety"

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.