

Crate Training Your Dog

Most puppies and young dogs that are crate trained with care and consideration find their nest to be a “must have” throughout their lives. A crate is a training tool that helps you teach your dog about housebreaking, security and comfort when alone, self-control and relaxation in distracting or congested environments. A crate prevents destructive chewing and other inappropriate behavior when your dog in training is unsupervised. A well crate trained dog is less anxious and stressful during experiences that are outside their normal routine. Crates offer dog owners peace of mind when “being there” isn’t possible and will offer people a “break” when remedial handling is essential for the well-being of people or dogs.

When my dogs were young and learning about living in a human environment, a crate was one of the important tools in my toolbox. My dogs crate was not a life style but part of living in my home. Some crate training and housebreaking programs use crates as the predominant place a puppy is to be. My use of a crate is very different in that it is a sometimes resting, eating and sleeping place and always a place where very special chewing things are provided. Otherwise, my dogs are kept with me and drag a “house leash” attached to their collar that I can pick up to influence behavior and implement a training plan as needed. Along with the house leash I use a gate to keep my pup in the room with me so I can monitor and supervise their activities. Things done in and around the crate make it an interesting environment to explore so my dogs always check in to their very special place and really want a crate to “be there” long after the need for its use as a training tool has ended.

It is true that not every dog adapts to a crate and not every dog owner uses one but I do find that crate training offers lots of versatility and flexibility without restricting the mobility of people in their home like gates can. The following information is intended to help dogs have as stress free crating experience as possible. You may find it best to incorporate some of the suggested systems and eliminate others that won’t work well for you or your dog. Overall, you may find the complete program works best but feel free to adapt suggestions to meet your specific circumstance.

Welcome To Your Happy Home

Since using a crate may be a fairly long-term plan for a curious, active young dog, it is essential that your dog enjoys being there. A crate should be a sanctuary and offer a feeling of well-being when confinement is necessary. Making a crate the hub in your puppy’s environment makes their spot a great place to refer to when they feel tired, hungry, looking for toys or something appropriate to chew. For a puppy or adult dog (without behavior problems that require specific strategies), plan that toy storage, feeding and chewables be offered and maintained in the crate area. In this way, the crate and other things that are important to your dog highlight the area and make it a very happy place. Think of the area as your dogs “Kiosk”! A well crate trained older dog may feel displaced if their crate is taken away because “he doesn’t need it anymore”. If you plan on traveling with your dog, a crate is a versatile “home away from home” and safety zone when you are driving. I purchase a crate that will be appropriate for my puppy when they are adult size. I don’t use dividers and generally find that baby

puppies will try their best to keep their area clean and dry if they are prepared well for confinement by plenty of exercise and the ability to eliminate before they rest in their crate. My usual time gauge is one hour per month of age plus one if well prepared. That means a 3-month-old puppy should be able to be confined for 3 to 4 hours without worry.

Location, Location, Location

There are many thoughts about where to put a crate. Some recommendations are to keep it in an active area of the house, some people want it in the basement or out of site place since it doesn't fit in their décor, others keep it in the kitchen and some think it is too big or looks like jail and they want it out of the scene asap! The main consideration should be what works best for your dog.

For the most part, dogs seem to like a place where they feel included in the life of their group, they want to be part of the pack. The contradiction is dogs (and people) don't do well when they are frustrated or disturbed too frequently. Some dogs can tune out noise and other distractions and some can't. If your dogs' personality includes a good amount of territorial or nervous characteristics, being crated near the entrance to your home can be very disturbing. These dogs are stressed by witnessing the comings and goings of people in the house and do quite a lot of barking. If your dog is intimidated or distrusting of strangers being "visited" while they are confined can be overwhelming. I like to compare their circumstances to someone sticking their head in our car window when we are at a stoplight. We would have the option of zooming away but there is nowhere for a crated dog to go. Dogs (like people) in defense have the flight or fight choice but when they are crated, flight is not an option (although some dogs most definitely plaster themselves to the back of the crate and do their best to hide) so barking and all sorts of other aggressive displays are common choices. Most dogs object to the isolation of a crate in the basement or spare room although every dog is different. I would guess that on a hot day, a crate in cool basement would be wonderful but in general, dogs feel very isolated and distressed when restricted in an unfamiliar location. Putting the crate in the basement because the puppy barks and cries is really missing the point of crate training and is not going to solve a crying problem.

In my experience, the best place for a crate is in your bedroom, a place where the dog can share your quiet resting time. All my puppies are raised with their crate in my bedroom and the benefits are many - the ease of overnight toileting needs and the return to sleep after an early morning excursion, restfulness when alone in the room without me, invisibility and relaxation when non-dog or other guests visit and an easy place to transition to less restricting confinement over night with supervision. Puppies that are crated away from human sleeping areas often make quite a fuss after an early morning potty break. These puppies may do much better if they are crated in your room overnight. The return to sleep is more automatic since the feeling of isolation is eliminated. In addition, even though people are sleeping, a well exercised, well crate trained dog will be perfectly happy to sleep in the crate with the door opened overnight feeling "supervised" in the family members presence. Dogs that are correctly housebroken will also indicate need even to a sleeping person.

Your Tool Box

To begin your Crate Training Program, you will need the following:

A Dog – Ok, sorry...

A Crate - I prefer wire models since they fold up for travel and storage and offer more options for cooling and ventilation. Some dogs and people prefer plastic. The size of the crate should be approximately 1 1/2 the total length of your dog and wide enough for his legs to stretch out. The height should offer enough space for the dog to sit up comfortably. He need not have so much headroom that his ears don't touch the crate top but sitting up comfortably is a definite must.

Safe, durable chewing items - Your dog will enjoy something to do while being confined. A stuffed Kong toy, sterilized marrow bone, Nylabone or similar chewable can also help direct dogs to the correct chewing item which will keep bedding intact for most dogs. Choose toys that you know are safe and will not be swallowed.

Bedding - Some dogs do very well with bedding, towels or blankets to sleep on. Other dogs will chew anything in their crate so they will have to graduate to soft things. Many puppies who have been housed in playpens, ex pens or cages with wire bottoms (as commonly seen in puppy stores) have no choice but to eliminate in their resting spots and develop habits that weaken the desire to keep their area clean. These puppies will definitely eliminate on anything absorbent and have found eliminating in confinement to be normal. One goal of crate training is to encourage dogs to wait to eliminate until they are taken out of confinement. Puppies will certainly eliminate in their crate if potty breaks, exercise and companionship are not offered frequently enough. Anything absorbent is often the place puppies choose to go. They then push the soiled item to the side or rested on anyway. If your pup has had a confusing beginning it is sometimes necessary to use minimal to no bedding until the habit can be changed. Minimal bedding may be a hand towel or bath towel for appropriately sized dogs. I would not be quick to use a foam mat or something with lots of padding since these items can become, shall we say, chewable dog toys for a young puppy. Fluffy bedding can also hide urine for quite a bit of time until the "funny smell" of old urine makes its presence known.

Collars and House Leashes – Safety concerns require that all collars and house leashes be removed while dogs are in confinement. I have a long list of tragic and disturbing stories about unfortunate incidents regarding collars and crates. It is best to have nothing at all on your dog when in confinement since accidents are unforeseen and sometimes consequences are irreversible.

Great Optional Items-A Radio, White Noise Machine or Table Top Serenity Water Fountain When being confined it is often very helpful to "set the mood" and turn on a peaceful noise machine, turn down the lights and offer something to chew. This practice develops Relaxation Cues, the direct opposite of the dreaded Departure Cue that causes dogs with separation anxiety problems to begin being upset. By turning on the special sound, turning down the lights, tossing a treat and chewable in the crate, asking your dog to go in and giving them a moment or two to transition successfully, you help set a mood that encourages restfulness and relaxation. I strongly recommend this practice when you are doing household chores or other things that can't or don't include your dog. When your dog comes out of the crate, the peaceful sound is eliminated, the lights go on and the special chewables are taken away.

The Beginning

Before you even start your first crate training steps you should take your dog outside to play or for a walk. If your dog is relaxed the process will move along more smoothly. Be sure he has eliminated and is not overly hungry. Although we will be using some high value treats for this process, I recommend that your dog be fed and ready for a nap. Choose a time that you will have an uninterrupted half hour and instruct your family to either join you or stay away. Interruptions can be frustrating so if the process is not too smooth, stop and resume your training later.

Step 1, Ins and Outs

You will need some soft, delicious, very special, small training treats...lots of them. With your dog present, display the treats in your hand and then toss one or two into the crate. While looking at the crate say "Go in!" in a quiet happy voice ...If your dog goes right in, (imagine yourself doing the dance of joy), add a few treats in the crate while your dog is inside and then say "come out!" in the same quiet happy voice. Do not offer any treats for coming out. Repeat a few times and then end the session for the moment.

It is much more likely that your dog will not jump right into the crate. If that is the case, continue adding treats to the crate as you look at the crate, not the dog. Some dogs will prefer you to move back and away from the crate entrance as you toss treats in. Experiment with distance and position, should you sit nearby, on the floor? On a chair? Beside the crate? In front? Stand? Each dog is different.

* If you are at an impasse, sprinkle a few treats in front of the crate and let your dog explore on their own.

* Try your best to say little and avoid forcing or overly encouraging your dog to explore. Dogs that are a bit suspicious will smell a trick and shut down making the beginning more difficult.

* If you are still at an impasse, leave the area and make a note of how quickly your dog decides to snoop around and explore the crate and its contents

- If your dog does eat the treats toss a few more further into the crate and in a quiet but happy voice say "Go in!". Allow your dog to stretch herself into the crate and stand by while she struggles to reach every last bit. Do add more treats even if her whole body is not in the crate. This is the beginning of success and by reinforcing her effort and making sure rewards are guaranteed, you are creating the desire to continue and try harder. When you think your dog has just about maximized her effort make further success easy and toss a few more treats inside the crate very near the entrance. When she is near finishing the treats say "Come out!" and when she moves away end the game and ceremoniously wrap up your treats and leave the area in a lighthearted mood. Your dog should continue to explore the crate and area...this is a good sign so don't interfere.
- A few minutes later, unwrap the treats and begin again - toss more treats in the crate say "Go In!" and allow her to explore again. Repeat this step until your dog is moving around the crate more freely. Toss treat pieces into the back of the crate so she has to move far into the crate to reach food dropping pieces into the back of the crate from the top, if that seems right. End the session when your dog is interested in looking for more treats and is less inhibited about putting her head inside. The important

part of this step is that your dog will go in and out of the crate without worry and find wonderful consequences of getting to know the area. Forcing your dog to go in the crate will often cause suspicion and reduce your dogs' desire to explore independently. Resist the temptation to push your dog in the crate or otherwise force your dog inside. Remember to end the session when your dog is still looking for treats.

- The next step encourages quick in and out reps. Toss your yummy treats inside the crate and say "Go in!" then as your dog is eating, "Come out!" then toss treats inside again and say "Go in!" and again, as your dog is eating, "Come out!" The goal in this step is to encourage quick reps of in and out, adding more treats when the dog is going in so it actually takes longer to find all the bits and your dog wants to stay in longer to find every last one. You should encourage your dog out of the crate before he is finished with all the pieces.
- The next step helps the dog linger inside. With rapid in and out commands the dog should experience "I come out - no treats, I go in - lots of treats so why come out!" When your dog seems reluctant to come out, drop a hand full of treats into the crate and then shut the door while your dog eats. When he stops, add more treats through the bars and then open the door and leave the area, the session is over and should have taken less than 5 minutes. Your dog should end the session wanting more delicious treats.
- This step involves duration in the crate when you are present. Prepare a Kong Toy, Marrow Bone or other delectable chewable item and keep it nearby. Repeat the in and out exercise and then ask your dog to enter the crate without tossing food in if possible. Add a handful of treats and the prepared item to the crate. Close and fasten the door and either read a book, watch TV or work on your computer nearby. Your dog should be relaxed and quiet, looking forward to a good chew! This is a good time to include **relaxation markers**.

Relaxation Markers

Relaxation Markers are the exact opposite of the very stressful departure cues that are the dreaded enemy of dogs with separation anxiety problems. Relaxation Markers are like putting on the TV or reading in bed in order to go to sleep. Many new parents use a music box and a rocking chair to soothe their babies and prepare them for sleep. Thinking in this way helps us set the stage to help our dogs think about napping. Think about drawing the shades to darken the room, turning on quiet music and offering a chewable item in the crate with the door closed. You should stand by, resting and reading for a few minutes while your dog relaxes. When things are pretty relaxed, turn off the music, open the shades and let your dog out of the crate taking away the chewable thing. Repeat the process frequently and extend the duration of time your dog is in the crate. You can also implement the same system when feeding your dog or doing household chores. If your dog doesn't like the vacuum cleaner it would be ideal to use the crate when you vacuum. Of course, you should plan on the same Relaxation Markers when you are going to sleep at night. Needless to say, in order to be effective, your dog should be sleeping in their crate in the bedroom. With Relaxation Markers in place your dog should understand what will come next and be very willing and relaxed about going into the crate.

Duration and Seclusion

When you are extending your dog's confinement time and leaving the room, pay attention to duration and your dog's stress levels. It is best to go slowly and not allow your dog to leave the crate when fussy. Returning to the area and resuming reading or TV while your dog settles down is a good idea. Usually, stressful behavior means you have moved too far too fast and returning to a successful part of the training sequence is advisable. Again, if your dog sleeps in your bedroom in their crate, the room itself encourages resting. Your bedroom will usually remain interruption free when guests are present. Each component of distraction challenge like visitors, family activities etc. are accepted at different rates by individual dogs. Keep trying and don't pile on challenges too quickly. If your dog is having real trouble, consult your instructor for additional help.

Distance Work

At this point, especially if you have been feeding your dog in his crate and offering special chewables inside, your dog should be very willing to "Go In and stay" inside the crate. You can use a few fun exercises to increase your dogs "drive" to get into the crate. "Ready, Set, Go!!" races to the crate with food tosses or a meal at the end, Motivational restraint to the food pile or Kong are great ways to increase happiness and interest in the crate training process. Mechanical Treat dispensers and other new training aids can make getting in and staying in the crate a great experience for your dog. Do look for Susan Garrett's DVD, Crate Games for other innovative training ideas.

With these ideas in place, your crate training experience should be fun, easy and stress free. If you are not having success please do share your experiences with your instructor.