

Crate Training

"Private room with a view. Ideal for traveling dogs or for those who just want a secure, quiet place to hang out at home."

That's how your dog might describe his crate. It's his own personal den where he can find comfort and solitude while you know he's safe and secure—and not shredding your house while you're out running errands.

Crating philosophy

Crate training uses a dog's natural instincts as a den animal. A wild dog's den is his home, a place to sleep, hide from danger, and raise a family. The crate becomes your dog's den, an ideal spot to snooze or take refuge during a thunderstorm.

The primary use for a crate is housetraining. Dogs don't like to soil their dens.

The crate can limit access to the rest of the house while he learns other rules, like not to chew on furniture.

Crates are a safe way to transport your dog in the car.

Crating caution!

A crate isn't a magical solution. If not used correctly, a dog can feel trapped and frustrated.

Never use the crate as a punishment. Your dog will come to fear it and refuse to enter it.

Don't leave your dog in the crate too long. A dog that's crated day and night doesn't get enough exercise or human interaction and can become depressed or anxious. You may have to change your schedule, hire a pet sitter, or take your dog to a doggie daycare facility to reduce the amount of time he must spend in his crate every day.

Puppies under six months of age shouldn't stay in a crate for more than three or four hours at a time. They can't control their bladders and bowels for that long. The same goes for adult dogs that are being housetrained. Physically, they can hold it, but they don't know they're supposed to.

Crate your dog only until you can trust him not to destroy the house. After that, it should be a place he goes voluntarily.

Selecting a crate

Several types of crates are available:

Plastic (often called "flight kennels")

Fabric on a collapsible, rigid frame

Collapsible, metal pens

Crates come in different sizes and can be purchased at most pet supply stores or pet supply catalogs.

Your dog's crate should be just large enough for him to stand up and turn around in. If your dog is still growing, choose a crate size that will accommodate his adult size. Block off the excess crate space so your dog can't eliminate at one end and retreat to the other. Your local animal shelter may rent out crates. By renting, you can trade up to the appropriate size for your puppy until he's reached his adult size, when you can invest in a permanent crate.

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 things in mind while crate training:

The crate should always be associated with something pleasant.
Training should take place in a series of small steps. Don't go too fast.

Step 1: Introduce your dog to the crate

Place 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. Take the door off and let the dog explore the crate at his leisure. Some dogs will be naturally curious and start sleeping in the crate right away. If yours isn't one of them:

Bring him over to the crate, and talk to him in a happy tone of voice. Make sure the crate door is open and secured so that it won't hit your dog and frighten him.
Encourage your dog to enter the crate by dropping some small food treats nearby, then just inside the door, and finally, all the way inside the crate. If he refuses to go all the way in at first, that's okay; don't force him 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 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: Feed your dog his meals in the crate

After introducing your dog to the crate, begin feeding him his 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, place the food dish all the way at the back of the crate. If he remains reluctant to enter the crate, put the dish only as far inside as he will readily go without becoming fearful or anxious. Each time you feed him, 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's eating. The first time you do this, open the door as soon as he finishes his meal. With each successive feeding, leave the door closed a few minutes longer, until he's staying in the crate for ten minutes or so after eating.
If he begins to whine to be let out, you may have increased the length of time too quickly. Next time, try leaving him in the crate for a shorter time period. If he does whine or cry in the crate, don't let him out until he stops. Otherwise, he'll learn that the way to get out of the crate is to whine, so he'll keep doing it.

Step 3: Lengthen the crating periods

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

Call him over to the crate and give him a treat.
Give him a command to enter, such as "kennel." Encourage him by pointing to the inside of the crate with a treat in your hand. After your dog enters the crate, praise him, give him the treat, and close the door.
Sit quietly near the crate for five to ten minutes, and then go into another room for a few minutes. Return, sit quietly again for a short time, and then let him out of the crate.
Repeat this process several times a day, gradually increasing the length of time you leave him in the crate and the length of time you're out of his sight.
Once your dog will stay quietly in the crate for about 30 minutes with you mostly out of sight, you can begin leaving him crated when you're gone for short time periods and/or letting him sleep there at night. This may take several days or several weeks.

Step 4, Part A: Crate your dog when you leave

After your dog can spend about 30 minutes in the crate without becoming anxious or afraid, you can begin leaving him crated for short periods when you leave the house.

Put him in the crate using your regular command and a treat. You might also want to leave him with a few safe toys in the crate.

Vary at what point in your "getting ready to leave" routine you put your dog in the crate. Although he shouldn't be crated for a long time before you leave, you can crate him anywhere from five to 20 minutes prior to leaving.

Don't make your departures emotional and prolonged—they should be matter-of-fact. Praise your dog briefly, give him a treat for entering the crate, and then leave quietly.

When you return home, don't reward your dog for excited behavior by responding to him in an excited, enthusiastic way. Keep arrivals low key to avoid increasing his anxiety over when you will return. Continue to crate your dog for short periods from time to time when you're home so he doesn't associate crating with being left alone.

Step 4, Part B: Crate 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'll want to be able to hear your puppy when he whines to be let outside.

Older dogs, too, should initially be kept nearby so they don't associate the crate with social isolation.

Once your dog is sleeping comfortably through the night with his crate near you, you can begin to gradually move it to the location you prefer, although time spent with your dog—even sleep time—is a chance to strengthen the bond between you and your pet.

Potential problems

Whining. If your dog whines or cries while in the crate at night, it may be difficult to decide whether he's whining to be let out of the crate, or whether he needs to be let outside to eliminate. If you've followed the training procedures outlined above, then your dog hasn't been rewarded for whining in the past by being released from his crate. If that is the case, try to ignore the whining. If your dog is just testing you, he'll probably stop whining soon. Yelling at him or pounding on the crate will only make things worse.

If the whining continues after you've ignored him for several minutes, use the phrase he associates with going outside to eliminate. If he responds and becomes excited, take him outside. This should be a trip with a purpose, not play time. If you're convinced that your dog doesn't need to eliminate, the best response is to ignore him until he stops whining. Don't give in; if you do, you'll teach your dog to whine loud and long to get what he wants. If you've progressed gradually through the training steps and haven't done too much too fast, you'll be less likely to encounter this problem. If the problem becomes unmanageable, you may need to start the crate training process over again.

Separation Anxiety. Attempting to use the crate as a remedy for separation anxiety won't solve the problem. A crate may prevent your dog from being destructive, but he may injure himself in an attempt to escape from the crate. Separation anxiety problems can only be resolved with counter-conditioning and desensitization procedures. You may want to consult a professional animal-behavior specialist for help.