

How to Teach Your Dog to Love His Crate



Ah, the dog crate. It makes housetraining easier. It provides your shy dog a refuge during your six-year-old's birthday party. It provides your traveling dog a measure of protection in a car accident. Some hotels require that doggy guests be crated when their humans leave the room. And all of that goes out the window if your dog hates his crate. How to persuade your dog that his crate is his second-best friend.

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You're at an advantage with a puppy or dog who's had no unpleasant experiences to undo. Making a good first impression is always easier than turning around a bad one. And set yourself and your dog up for success by planning ahead. If you brought your new puppy home on Friday afternoon, don't introduce him to his crate right before you leave for work on Monday morning. And don't let your grown dog's first experience of crating be the first time you leave him on his own in a hotel.

Here are the most important things to keep in mind:

- **Not too big, not too small**
- **Location, location, location**
- **Rewards are everything**
- **Close the door**
- **Be patient**
- **Use a command cue**
- **Don't give in**
- **Strategic timing**

Pick the Right Crate for Your Dog

Choose a crate big enough for your dog to stand up and turn around in, and also to stretch out comfortably when he lies down. Make it inviting with a cushy bed. If your dog's inclined to chew his bed, get a chew-resistant bed, give it some competition from safe, chewable toys, or use rags and old sheets that your dog can destroy without giving you an aneurysm. (Actual ingestion of cloth is a whole 'nother problem.)

Where to Put Your Dog's Crate

Set up the crate near where you hang out—in your home office, in front of the sofa where you watch TV, or by your bed. You can move it from place to place, or for that matter have multiple crates if your house is all that big. Once your dog loves his crate, it can be his remote hideout when he needs one, but his first lesson shouldn't be that crate = social isolation.

You want to send a simple, clear message: good things happen to dogs inside their crates.

Train Your Dog to Love the Crate

If you're in no rush, here's an easy, relaxed way to crate train. Keep the crate open and available in a spot where your dog likes to rest anyway, or in your puppy's safe enclosure if you're starting with a young thing. Every so often, toss a treat inside. When your dog enters her crate to get the treat, say "Yes!" and deliver another treat to her while she's still inside. If you happen to catch your dog resting on that supercomfy bed you put in the crate, tell her what a good dog she is and drop a treat in with her. You can also feed your dog his meals in the crate. All this sends a simple, clear message: good things happen to dogs inside their crates.

A sneaky but effective tactic is to smear peanut butter on the crate wall, or put a food-stuffed toy inside the crate, then close the crate door—without your dog inside. When he notices those good smells floating out of the crate, he'll likely try to reach the source. Let him get just a tiny bit frustrated—you don't want to drive him out of his mind—then open the crate door and let him in.

Get Your Dog Used to Closing the Crate

Once your dog is entering the crate happily and you've caught her resting inside a couple of times, start closing the door for a few seconds at a time. Some dogs settle right in, but for others the transition to a closed door can be a big deal.

You can help make the process easy by choosing a time when your dog is relaxed after vigorous exercise and has a reason to stay in the crate for a few minutes anyway. For instance, she might be enjoying an edible chew or excavating a food-dispensing toy. While she's thus occupied, open and close the crate door a few times, leaving it closed for gradually longer periods.

How Long Does Crate Training Take?

How long should you keep the door closed at first, and how quickly should you progress? The only hard-and-fast rule I can give you is to let your dog be your guide. Is he completely absorbed in his stuffed chew toy, so he doesn't even notice that you've closed the door? Is she a four-month-old who's just enjoyed half an hour of play and training in the backyard and who eliminated right before you brought her indoors, so when you put her in her crate she said yip yip and promptly collapsed into puppy sleep? Then odds are you can work fast.

On the other hand, maybe your dog took her sweet time getting to the point where she'd enter the crate at all. And then it took her a few days to learn to linger there instead of grabbing your tossed treats and dashing out again. If that's your dog, go slow. Don't even think about closing that crate door for the first time till she's lost all trace of anxiety about hanging out inside with the door wide open. And when you start, start small, with the door closed partway and then shut but not latched. Slow and steady will always win the skittish-dog crate-training race.

For many dogs, though, crate training goes 1-2-3. I confess that with my own puppy, I got lucky with a super-fast approach. We set up his crate, we brought him home, we tired him out, and then we popped him in to sleep. His first few nights away from his mother and litter, we took turns sleeping next to the crate with one hand resting just inside the door. That is about as brisk as any intro to crate should be, and notice that we didn't ask Juniper to get used to his crate and to sleeping alone all in one swell foop.

Teach Your Dog to Enter His Crate on Cue

You can easily teach your dog to enter his crate on cue. As always, you'll say the cue just before your dog does the relevant behavior, and only at that time. Your dog learns that those particular sounds coming out of your mouth predict that he might just get a reward for performing that particular behavior. Suppose your cue is "Crate time!" you'll say it, then toss a treat in the crate so your dog goes in. After a few

reps, say the cue and move your empty hand as if tossing a treat. Then deliver a treat from your other hand. Once your dog has associated the cue "Crate time!" with going into his crate, you can begin to give treats occasionally instead of every time.

How to Deal with Barking and Whining

What if your dog or puppy vocalizes while in his crate? As usual, the answer is "It depends." If your young pup wakes you at three a.m., odds are he needs a toilet break. Take him on leash to his pee and poop spot and then immediately put him back to bed. The idea is to meet his needs but not turn the wee hours into puppy funtime.

As a general rule, you don't want to reinforce demand barking or demand whining—"I want out, and I want it now!" The same goes if what you're hearing is your dog's usual response to the mailman or some other everyday stimulus. Remember, even a reprimand constitutes attention and may strengthen the behavior you're trying to quell. Instead, ignore it. Let your dog out when he's calm and quiet.

But all bets are off if your dog is in distress. Puppies aren't the only ones who sometimes have urgent toilet needs. And a thunder-phobic dog may panic when he senses an approaching storm; feeling trapped in the crate won't do him any good. Finally, separation anxiety doesn't mix with crates. Dogs with this disorder may bloody their paws and break their teeth trying to escape.

Crate Abuse

Crates look like cages. And, well, they are. But accepting confinement comfortably is a useful skill for any animal living in the human world.

On the other hand, crates can easily be abused. The rambunctious, pushy, destructive dog who's spending 18 hours crated out of every 24 needs exercise, training, and company. And while a well-exercised dog will likely snooze most of the day while you're at work, she needs at least one break to relieve herself and stretch her legs.

Those cautions aside, your dog's crate may surprise you with its popularity.