

Crate training- step by step

There are a few different situations that might be a reason your dog isn't comfortable in his crate and this article will help you address these:

1. You might have the wrong idea about crates and trained your dog not to like them
2. Your dog might be young and/or not had any experience with crates
3. Your dog might have had a bad experience in a crate

Why Crate?

Crates should be a safe place for your dog to relax. It should be a place where he isn't pestered by kids or other dogs and isn't isolated from everything going on in the house. It is also a safe place for the dog because you will know he isn't chewing electric cords and your favorite belongings, digging up the carpet and house plants, house soiling, pestering other pets or any other trouble a young dog could get into. Even if you don't crate your dog, it doesn't mean he might never be in a crate. If your dog gets injured, he might need to stay in a crate at the vet's office. If being in a crate is stressful, it will reduce the dog's healing speed and stress-fits might cause further injury. If the dog needs to be professionally groomed, he might be put in a crate to dry or be contained. If there is a disaster in your area and you need to evacuate with your pet, he will need to be crated if he has to stay in a temporary shelter. Travel in a vehicle is MUCH safer for your dog if he is crated. And if you want to take a shower at Dog Scout camp, it will be much easier if you can give the dog a chance to rest safely in his crate. It also allows him some rest time without you so you can continue to enjoy activities like craft time or a lecture.

Crates are not bad

If you were thinking crates are just cages and that confining your dog in a cage is bad, hopefully the above paragraph has helped to change your perspective. Most dogs, if given the chance and proper training, will LOVE their crate and choose to sleep in it if they can. Many dogs like it if the crate is covered and "den-like" and the proper size: just big enough for the dog to stand with a few inches in front of his nose and behind his rump and over his head/ears. If the crate is too big, it doesn't have the same safe feeling. However, some dogs are different and prefer a more open feel of an uncovered wire type crate in which they can keep an eye on what is going on around them so some experimenting may be in order. If you feel negatively about the crate, your dog will pick-up on those feelings and the training will be harder.

If you have tried putting the dog in the crate and found the dog is not happy in there, you may have accidentally trained him to act out in his crate. Remember, dog's do what works for them so if he was let out of the crate when he whined or barked, that's what he will do more of in the crate. Give it another try using the steps below and there's a good chance your dog will feel better about his crate (and so will you!)

It is a real pleasure to know your dog has a safe place where you can leave him or have him stay if you are traveling or want to compete in a sport with your dog or just go to camp and have fun!

Step-by-step crate training

If your dog is just a puppy or has not had any experiences with a crate, you can use the steps below to help them understand that the crate is a safe place to relax. Don't use the crate for punishment, you want the dog to love going in there and feel calm when in the crate. The following might look like a lot of steps, but with most puppies and dogs that are brand-new to crates, this training will only take a few sessions to get through. A big part of the dog being willing to be calm and quiet in the crate is the amount of exercise he has gotten prior to going in the crate. If he is full of energy, being calm is going to be much, much harder than if he's ready for a nap. This is true of any age dog.

For your new puppy's first night in a crate, it might help to add a "snuggle puppy" which is a stuffed toy with a warming pad and electronic heartbeat sound. This can help comfort the pup on his first few nights away from all his littermates and give him something to snuggle with during the night. The pup's crate should also be put as close to you as possible, on the bed or on a bedside table, so the pup can see, hear and smell you and so you will hear if he needs to go outside or gets worried during the night.

1. Put the crate in a central place in your house. Dogs don't like to be isolated from their people and they like to be able to see what's going on. If you have a certain room where you mostly spend your time when you are home, put the crate there. If your dog has to be put in a crate while you are at work and is showing signs of stress, read the section below on dogs with bad experiences with crates.
2. Prepare the crate with comfortable bedding such as a large folded towel or fleece blanket or bed. We will minimize the chances that the dog will chew these items with the following training and by making sure there are more tempting and appropriate items for the dog to work on while crated.

3. Leave the door of the crate open and see if the pup will go in, odds are he will investigate the crate. If he does, toss in some yummy treats and praise heavily, but not excitedly, you don't want to fire the pup up, you want the crate experience to be calm and soothing. If it's a wire type crate, you can drop the treats through the top.
4. After the pup has gotten several treats in the crate (door stays open) wait till he comes out of the crate on his own. As soon as he exits the door, let him see you toss more treats into the crate. You'll repeat this step several times as a game. Before long, the pup should be reluctant to exit the crate!
5. Once the pup gets to the point where he doesn't want to leave the crate, you can start closing the door very briefly. Toss a handful of treats into the crate, pup goes in to get them, you close the door. As SOON AS the pup sees notices the door is closed, you'll open it and toss in a few more treats and close the door again.
6. When the pup finishes the treats and notices the door, count "One one-thousand" and open the door to toss in more treats. When those are finished, count "one one-thousand, two one-thousand" and open the door to toss in more goodies.
7. If at anytime the pup gets worried about the door being closed (whimpering, pawing at the door, ears down, tail down) push a treat through the closed door (or the top of the crate) and as the pup is eating it, open the door and walk away- game ends for a few minutes. The pup's stress has told you that you pushed the time too far too fast. You don't want to do that too often (ideally never, but if it happens it's not the end of the world, just information for you.) You'll need to go for a shorter amount of time when you start the game again and work toward longer times more slowly. If the pup is not stressed but just pawing or whining in anticipation of the treats, as though he's saying "feed me more!" you can ignore that and only open the door to toss in treats if he's calm and quiet for a few seconds.
8. You can use meals times as training times. Feed the pup in the crate with the door closed (if he can handle that without stress) or use his meal as the training morsels mentioned above. You can also give special treats in the pup's crate. Tying or wiring the treats to the back of the crate (see photo below) helps reinforce the pup while in the crate but allows you to keep the crate door open.
9. As the time with the door closed gets longer, you can start working on the pup's behavior in the crate. If he offers you a sit and is quiet, you can immediately open the crate door and toss in some goodies as a reward. We like quiet sitting and want to let the pup know! Same with a quiet down. Gradually, you'll have the pup maintain those positions for longer and longer before you open the door and toss in a reward.
10. So now the pup is happy to stay in the crate and is quiet with the door closed for a full minute or two with you right by the door. Now you need to teach him that having you go away from the crate is not a bad thing. Start by tossing treats in the crate and standing up or taking a single step away if you were already standing before. The pup should notice you crouching again or taking a step back just as he's finishing his treats. Repeat this but next take two steps away. Return as the pup is finishing his treats. Next time, see if you can remain two steps away as you count "one one-thousand" and return to open the door and toss in treats.
11. You'll build distance, then length of time. If you go farther away, do it for a shorter time and then build up the time again at that distance. Don't try to add more distance and more time at the same time. Don't rush back to the crate, go back calmly to toss in more treats and praise happily, but low key. As you start working up to minutes, you can start working on something else in the room; just don't get distracted until the pup lets you know you pushed it too far!
12. Eventually, your distance will take you out a door and out of sight. This is a really big step for most dogs! At first, only disappear for the briefest amount of time physically possible. This will be less than one second. Go back calmly to the crate and toss in more treats and praise happily, but low key. VERY gradually build the amount of time the pup can handle you being out of sight. If the pup is having trouble with this step, you might need to go to higher value rewards that take him longer to finish, like a stuffed Kong or a chew bone. Just let him work on these while you are doing the training and DON'T rush it! Your attitude should be that "this is no big deal and of course the pup will do this." If you get worried or excited, so will the pup. Your return to the crate should ALWAYS and forever be happy, but low key and not excited. The door should ONLY be opened if the pup is calm and quiet. If the pup barks, paws, spins, or otherwise acts wild you wait for calm. If you have done the above steps correctly and not rushed, then odds are these won't be an issue because you have been rewarding calmness throughout the training.

Dogs with bad experiences

If your dog has a negative association with crates, the training process may take a bit longer to achieve. You'll have to change how the dog feels about the crate and depending on what has happened to the dog while in a crate in the past, this might be a huge task. But there are very few dogs that cannot overcome their fears when they work with a loving, motivated and patient trainer (you.)

If your dog HAS to be crated, while you are at work or when you leave the house, get two completely different kinds of crates, such as one wire and one airline/solid type.) Use one of them for the required confinement and do the training steps with the other. Eventually, your dog will associate the training type of crate with a calm state of mind and then eventually that one can be used when you leave the house.

The training steps will be the same as above, but the steps will be broken down into smaller increments and repeated more times to be sure the dog is completely comfortable with each level before increasing the difficulty.

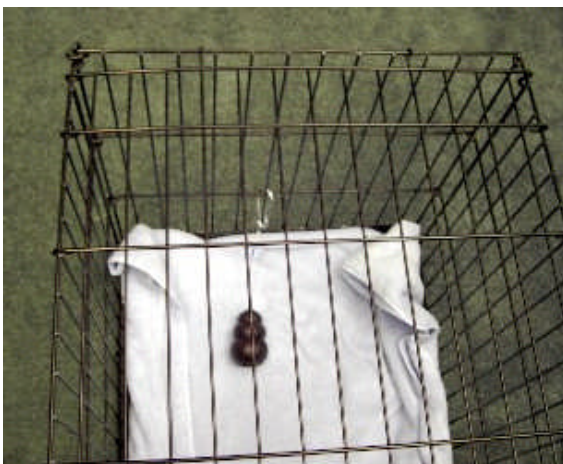
The first step might simply be to have the crate in the main part of the house where the dog has to see it and pass by it. Be sure the crate has lots of goodies in it for the dog to randomly discover. If you have other dogs in the house, let the timid dog see the other dogs confidently going in there to find the surprise treats. Sometimes it helps to get a larger crate and go through the steps with the confident dog while the timid one watches. However, if the confident dogs in the house scare or bully the timid dog, remove them from sight while you work with the timid dog on the training steps. If a more assertive dog in the house sees all the crates as his, then he might be communicating that "ownership" with just a "look" or certain subtle body language. The timid dog will refuse to go into the crate because it would not be the safe thing to do in the presence of the more assertive dog.

With fearful dogs, it's very important to take things at whatever pace the dog can handle and don't rush things. Be friendly and happy, but very matter of fact and not pleading or whiney with your voice. The dog might interpret a whiney tone as fear from you about the situation.

If there is separation anxiety involved, you'll need to take the "out of sight" steps very gradually and don't increase the amount of time you are out of sight too fast. Build it up in half-seconds and do lots of repetitions at each amount of time. This is where having the two types of crates is really important if your dog needs to be crated each day. If the dog gets worried during training in the "training type crate", go back several seconds (or minutes if you've worked up to that) to where the dog can easily handle it. Don't always make the time longer though, mix it up by tossing in much shorter times and slightly shorter times, just keep in mind the maximum amount of time you are working on and don't exceed that.

If you have any trouble, there are people that can help just an email away! The Dog Scouts of America Yahoo List is a great place to get training advice that is reward based and positive.

This information is provided as a public service by Dog Scouts of America. If you share it, please include this credit. www.DogScouts.org has lots of other great training articles as well!



Stuffed Kong attached to the back of the crate so the dog can't remove it through the crate door which is left open during training. This makes sure the rewards in the Kong are received INSIDE the crate!



A close-up that shows the wire attached to a stainless steel washer (not visible) inside the top of the Kong and to a snap that makes it easy to remove it from the crate for refilling. The ends of the wire are wrapped in electrical tape to cover any sharp ends.