



Crate Training: Thinking Outside the Box

Crate training is an important skill that all pet owners should teach their pets. Whether it's a puppy you're house training, a cat that needs to go to the vet, or a ferret that is flying with you when you move across the country, all animals can learn to enjoy spending time in the safety of a crate if taught properly. Crate training should only be used as a short-term management tool while working on a particular behavioral issue. Below are some tips, geared toward dogs, that will help you better crate train your new family member.

Reasons to use a crate:

- *Destructive animals.* Many people who have recently adopted a dog think they have to put their dog in a crate right away when left alone for fear that their dog might be destructive or will have lots of accidents. This really isn't necessary if you take the time to get to know your dog while you are home. Before you feel the need to jump to a crate, answer these questions: Are they chewing things other than the dog toys you've put out for them? Are they still having accidents despite you taking them out frequently? Though it's never recommended to give a dog full run of the house unless there is someone around to supervise, many dogs do quite well while their owners are away in a dog-proofed room, such as a kitchen, laundry room, or bedroom. "Dog proofed" means that extraneous objects (clothing, shoes, children's toys, etc.) have been put away, trash cans are in secure locations that your dog can't get to, and plugged-in power cords are out of your dog's reach. You may need to use an appropriate-sized baby gate to keep your new family member safely contained. Please see our Excessive Chewing & Puppy Biting handout.
- *House Training.* Crate training can come in really handy when you're house training a young puppy or an adult dog. The crate can be used to when you are not around to monitor your animal when you're asleep at night or out of the house. Most dogs do not want to go to the bathroom in the same area where they sleep and eat, so crates can help teach animals to hold their bladders. In order to safely do that, you have to know how long an animal can safely hold their bladder, which varies based on age and size. Typically, larger-breed dogs can hold their bladders for longer than smaller-breed dogs. Also, at night, both puppies' and adults' need to eliminate slows down due to their circadian rhythms, so you should not need to get up in the middle of the night to let them potty. Adult dogs really shouldn't be crated for longer than 4-5 hours at a time, so you may need to plan to come home over a lunch break to let your dog out or hire a dog walker or neighborhood friend to help let out your dog. They also should have water.

The general rule of thumb for determining the length of time puppies can hold their bladder is a ratio of 1 hour for every month they are old, so a two-month-old puppy can hold their bladder for 2 hours, a three-month-old puppy for 3 hours, and so on. This will also vary based on the individual dog. If you are not able to let your puppy out every 2-3 hours while they're young due to your work schedule, set up a puppy corral or puppy play pen on tile or laminate flooring; then place a crate with the door open in that area with a water bowl and toys that they can safely chew on while they're alone. In one area of the puppy play pen, place a puppy pad so your puppy can urinate and defecate in one area that is easy to clean up. Then, when they're old enough to hold their bladders for a longer period of time, you can start crate training. You can also have a similar setup in a large crate where their water and bed are at one end and the puppy pad is at the other end. Puppies should always have access to water, so getting a water bowl that attaches to the side of the crate will prevent your puppy from spilling the water and creating a mess. Please see our handout on House Training for more helpful tips.

- *Acclimating New Family Members to One Another.* It's always important to supervise the interactions between a new dog or puppy and your resident dogs, cats, or children. Most resident dogs and cats will be a little on edge while they get to know this new furry friend. In order for things to go well, introductions should be done slowly, and you'll want to pick up things they could fight over, such as food and toys. When you aren't around to supervise your new dog, they should be kept in a separate room or crated so that no potential fights can break out while you're away. Sometimes when two dogs in a home don't get along, a process called Crate and Rotate can be used to help the dogs acclimate to one another. The process involves keeping one dog crated and the other dog out and then switching the dogs so the dog that was previously out is now crated and the one that was crated is out. This has to be done with structured time intervals so that both dogs have equal amounts of time out of the crate. Please see our handouts on Dog to Dog Aggression in the Home and Dog & Cat Introductions for more helpful tips.
- *Nighttime Haven.* To ensure that your new dog or puppy is not getting into things around the house or having accidents while you're asleep, you may want to consider crating them at night. The best way to start nighttime crating is to put the dog's crate in your bedroom because they'll be able to see where you are and that you're sleeping too. Most puppies are used to sleeping with their littermates, so being in the same room as their new owners will cut down on lonely whining and crying at bedtime.
- *Rambunctiousness and Time-outs.* It's common for owners to become frustrated with their young, energetic puppy or adolescent dog. They are often jumpy, mouthy, and energetic and will often try to push their boundaries to see what they can get away with. It's your responsibility as a good dog owner to make sure your dog is properly exercised and trained so that this rambunctious behavior doesn't get out of hand. Despite your coming home from a long, draining day at work, your dog has been waiting all day for your return and is in desperate need of a long walk and your attention. You may need to consider doggie daycare or a dog walker if you do not have the time and energy to devote to your dog's exercise. Some young dogs have a difficult time self-regulating their energy levels, so you may have to help teach them how to cool down by using the crate for scheduled nap times, but that will only be effective if you've taken the time to exercise your dog beforehand.

Using the crate for time-outs is not an effective way to teach your dog that they've done something wrong because by the time you pick them up and put them in the crate, many seconds have passed from when they actually did the inappropriate behavior. A more effective way to deal with that inappropriate behavior would be to teach your dog what they should be doing in place of what they shouldn't be doing. For example, if you have a puppy that is being jumpy and nippy, you could teach them an incompatible behavior such as lying down quietly (and make sure you have treats nearby to reward this more desirable behavior), or you could have them do something else such as redirecting them to playing with a plush squeaky toy instead of chewing and jumping on you.

If you're at your wit's end and need a break from your puppy, by all means, use the crate for your own personal breather so you don't feel the need to resort to physical punishment. Just remember that the issues you're dealing with won't go away unless your pet is exercised and trained. If you feel the need to use a time-out in the crate, it should only last 5-20 minutes. If you only use the crate for punishment, your dog will never enjoy going in the crate, which can create behavioral problems. Please go to the Wayside Waifs behavior and training page for more training articles and for information about public obedience classes.

- **Choose the appropriate-sized crate.** Everyone has different preferences about whether they want to purchase a metal-wire crate or a plastic crate (often referred to as a pet taxi or kennel). The metal crates offer a bit more cross ventilation and are more open but cannot be used while transporting a dog on a plane. The plastic crates are a little darker and may make some dogs feel cozier and more secure because it mimics a dog den. If you don't know how your dog will do in a crate or you suspect they may try to escape, a plastic crate is a safer option because they will be less likely to harm themselves physically should they try to escape a plastic crate compared to a metal crate. Adult dogs should be able to sit, stand, turn around, and lie down without their head, feet, or rear touching the walls. If you are using the crate to help with house training, you want to make sure it's not so large that your dog or puppy can urinate or defecate at one end and then sleep at the other end. If you have a growing puppy, you may have to consider buying different-sized crates as they grow or buy a crate with a divider that you can gradually move as the puppy grows.
- **Crate training takes time.** Never assume that you can adopt a dog on a Sunday afternoon and then on Monday leave your new dog or puppy in a crate for 8-10 hours of a work day and that your new dog will be okay with this. Many dogs become emotionally distressed when socially isolated from other people or animals, especially when adjusting to a new home. They may bark excessively or try to escape their crate by pawing and biting at the door. In order for your dog to feel comfortable in a crate, you'll need to take an active role in helping make being in the crate a pleasant experience for your dog.

- **Crate train your dog using small approximations.** If you take the time to crate your dog using the steps outlined below, you will be much less likely to have a dog with behavioral issues surrounding the crate. The amount of time it takes to crate train a dog will vary from dog to dog, depending on how they react to being confined and socially isolated. Some people are able to condense this training plan into one weekend while others may prefer to practice this over the course of a month. *Always make sure you are taking the time to make sure they have been pottied, exercised, and played with before working on crate training because crate training is much easier when they're tired and don't need to go out.*
 - Start by feeding your new dog its meals while in the crate while leaving the kennel door open. You can also keep a couple of toys or chew bones in their crate so they can run in and grab them when they feel like playing. Pairing food and toys with the crate will help your dog form a positive association with it.
 - While you are passively helping your dog to pair being in the crate with good things like food and toys, you will also need to take a more proactive role in teaching your dog to accept going into a crate.
 - **Day 1:** Train your dog to go into the crate on command. Start by finding a high-value training treat that your dog loves (e.g., a small piece of a hot dog) and decide what verbal cue you want to use (e.g., "go to your crate," "kennel up," "go to your bed"). Then, while sitting near the crate, show your dog that you have a great treat, say your cue, and toss one piece of the treat in the crate. Then excitedly verbally praise your dog by saying "Good dog!" and give them another treat from your hand while they are in the crate. Allow your dog to exit the kennel with a calm release word, such as "okay." Practice this exercise about 8 times, then take a 60-minute break, then practice it again 8 times in the morning and evening.
 - **Day 2:** Train your dog to go into the crate on command without luring with food. Get your dog warmed up by practicing the exercise from Day 1 a couple of times. Then the next step is, instead of tossing a treat in the crate, point into the crate (while gesturing somewhat similarly to how you tossed the treat) while saying your designated cue. If your dog goes in voluntarily, verbally praise them again by saying, "Good dog!" excitedly, and give them a treat while they are inside the crate. Release your dog by saying "okay" calmly. You want to teach your dog that being in the crate is great and exciting and that being let out of the crate is no big deal and not very exciting. Practice this exercise about 8 times, then take a 60-minute break, then practice it again 8 times in the morning and evening.
 - **Day 3:** Train your dog to go into the crate with the door closing behind them. Get your dog warmed up by practicing the exercise from Day 2 a couple of times. Then the next step is to point to the crate while saying your verbal cue, and if your dog goes in, verbally praise your dog and give them a treat. But, before you release your dog, slowly and quietly close the crate's door (without latching it), feed them 2-3 treats through the crate door while verbally praising with "Good dog!", then calmly open the door while saying your release word, "okay." The crate door should only be shut for about 4 seconds. Practice this exercise about 8 times, then take a 60-minute break, then practice it again 8 times in the morning and afternoon. With each repetition you want to gradually increase the number of seconds the crate door is closed while throwing in some easy 1-3 second intervals so your dog does not begin to panic about being in a crate for longer and longer periods of time.

- **Day 4:** Train your dog to accept being physically and visually separated from you while being in the crate. Get your dog warmed up by practicing the exercise from Day 3 a couple of times. The next step is to latch the crate door after they've entered their crate, give them a treat, stand up and take a couple of steps away, pause for a couple of seconds, and then return to them and give them a treat through the crate door. Use your release word, "okay," and then open the crate door. If your dog begins to whine, bark, or paw at the door while you stand and take a couple of steps away, wait for a brief moment of your dog being quiet and calm before returning. Practice this exercise repeatedly as you've done in previous days while variably increasing the distance you are away from the crate to the point where you can step briefly outside the room and out of your dog's view for a couple of seconds. Try to work up to being out of the room for 60 seconds. Always return to your dog and reward them for being in the crate.
- **Day 5:** Train your dog to be in the crate for longer durations of time. Find a high-value but long-lasting treat that your dog loves. Examples might include: a Kong filled with peanut butter or wet dog food (freezing it helps it last longer), bully stick, rawhide, deer antler, or Busy Buddy chew toy. Other things you'll need will include the same training treats you used on previous days and something to entertain yourself (book, laptop, smartphone, TV, etc.). Start this exercise by asking your dog to enter the crate as you always do, praise your dog for entering the crate, then give your dog its long-lasting treat and latch the door. Sit down in the same room as your dog and read or watch TV for about 30 minutes. If your dog finishes its treat before the 30 minutes is up, you can periodically give your dog the smaller training treats if he or she is being quiet and calm. Once the 30 minutes is up, calmly let your dog out of the crate. Take a 60-minute break and then practice again for 30 minutes both in the morning and evening.
- **Day 6:** Train your dog to be in the crate and alone for longer periods of time. Repeat the same exercise outlined on Day 5, except now you're going to leave the room to go do things in other areas of the house for 15 minutes. If your dog cries or whines, ignore them. Once the 15 minutes are up and your dog is quiet (for a minimum of 5 seconds), let them out of the crate. If your dog hasn't finished its long-lasting treat by the time the 15 minutes is up, allow them to finish it but only give them these high-value items when they go in the crate. Repeat one or two more times later in the day with adequate time out of the crate. Try to work up to 60 minutes.
- **Day 7:** Practice leaving the house. If your dog can quietly relax in the crate for about an hour while you're out of sight, you're ready to try leaving the house. Plan on running a short errand that will take you 30-60 minutes. If you always have the TV on or music going while you're home, try to keep some calming background noise playing while you're away. You don't want your home to feel remarkably different while you are away compared to when you're home. If your dog can do this exercise successfully, then your dog is ready to be left in a crate for longer periods of time.
- **Remote Monitoring Devices:** If you're concerned that your dog might panic while you're away and you want to be able to check in with your dog while you are away, there are many great baby monitors that sync up to your smart phone with a particular app, allowing you to monitor your dog while you're away. You can also set up a laptop computer with Skype and use your phone Skype account to call your Skype laptop account. Just make sure

your laptop Skype account is muted so that your dog can't hear you while you call to check in on them.

- **Separation Anxiety:** Dogs that have been rehomed multiple times are more likely develop separation anxiety than dogs that have lived in the same home their whole lives. Separation anxiety can vary from mild to severe. Mild separation anxiety might include dogs that bark and whine a little when you initially leave. Severe separation anxiety includes dogs that may urinate and defecate in the crate and try to chew their way out of a crate and may break their own teeth or lacerate their bodies in the process. Those dogs are having a full-blown panic attack. They may continue to try to escape by chewing on areas around the doorways or windows. Some dogs will panic while in a confined space but do better in a room that is slightly more open such as a bedroom or kitchen that has been baby gated and dog proofed. If you believe your dog might be suffering from separation anxiety, please see our handout on separation anxiety and seek the help of a certified animal behaviorist.

In summary, crate training is a great way to keep an unsupervised animal safe and gives an animal an area of the house where they can relax and feel secure should they feel overwhelmed during moments of commotion. Once your dog has become house trained, gets along well with other animals in the home, or is no longer getting into things, you should gradually try giving your dog more freedom and rely on the crate less. It's also a great skill to teach your dog so that it's not a shock should they need to be kenneled while traveling or for an overnight stay in the vet's office. Keep their experiences in the crate positive and not excessively used for time-outs and punishment.

*If, after trying these suggestions, you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your **dog**, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.*

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Additional links and information:

<http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/weekend-crate-training>

<http://www.clickertraining.com/to-crate-or-not-to-crate>

<https://positively.com/dog-behavior/puppy-knowledge/puppy-housetraining/crate-training/>

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