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Life Skills for Pets: Crate Training and Confinement for Puppies and Dogs

Why should I crate train my puppy or dog?

Being able to relax when confined is an important life skill for puppies and dogs. For example, confinement may be necessary in any of the following situations:



- When you are not available to supervise your young puppy or newly adopted dog. Confinement in a safe comfortable place can keep your pet safe, prevent house-training mistakes, and protect your home from possible property damage.
- When your dog needs to be separated from visiting workers or guests.
- When other pets or children might disturb your dog.
- When your dog needs a safe place to rest, undisturbed, such as when recovering from an injury or illness.

- When you are house-training your dog and are unable to supervise.
- When you travel with your dog.
- When your dog needs to spend time at the veterinary hospital or groomer.
- When your dog goes to camp or a boarding facility.
- When there is an emergency requiring evacuation or temporary sheltering.

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A crate for a pet is like a crib, travel sleeper, or playpen for a small child. It is a safe area that can be associated with resting and sleeping. When crate training is done carefully, many dogs are so comfortable in their crates that they voluntarily curl up inside their private “dens” when they are ready for a nap. The familiar cozy crate can be brought along during travel, allowing your dog to have a "home away from home."

When should I start crate training?

Crate training can start at any age. Starting early makes training easier. The majority of dogs adjust to crate confinement easily. If you notice any signs of distress and are concerned about your dog's comfort, for example if they salivate, persistently vocalize, try to escape, or do not settle, consult your veterinarian before continuing with your training plan.

How do I choose a crate for my dog?

There are many pros and cons to consider when choosing a crate.

Collapsible Wire Crates

Advantages:

- Easy to move and fold flat for storage
- Allow you to view your dog easily

Disadvantages:

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- Dogs may damage the crate bars if they try to escape
- If dogs try to chew the wires, they can injure their teeth or jaws
- Not approved for airline travel
- Not sturdy for car travel in case of an accident

Plastic Crates

Advantages:

- Medium weight
- Easy to clean
- Contain messes, keeping your floor clean
- Provide a quiet area with less visual stimulation
- Can be used for airline travel
- Moderately sturdy for car travel in case of an accident

Disadvantages:

- Not collapsible
- More difficult to view your dog

Metal Box-Style Crates

Advantages:

- Sturdy and durable for any travel (verify airline approval before using for a flight)
- Dog cannot escape or damage the crate by chewing
- Spacing of bars reduces risk of jaw injury

Disadvantages:

- Heavy and may require an additional storage area
- Expensive to purchase

Crash-Tested Crates

Sleepypod, Variocage, Gunnar, and RuffLand are examples of crash-tested crates.

Advantage: Secure, safe, and sturdy



Disadvantage: Expensive to purchase

Crate Alternatives

- Play yards or exercise pens made of metal, plastic or mesh fabric are alternatives to crates; some pens include a ceiling panel to prevent dogs from climbing out.
- Most pens can be folded for storage or travel and many are expandable.
- Baby gates may be used to confine dogs to safe areas.
- An entire room may be puppy-proofed and used to enclose your dog.

The crate should be large enough for the dog to comfortably lay on his side stretched out. For puppies, you will need a smaller crate and then increase the size as the puppy grows. Some crates come with a divider designed to make the crate smaller when the dog is young, then increase the size gradually as the puppy grows larger. The crate should be the size of a bed, not a bedroom.

If you choose a pen or a room with a baby gate, expect your puppy to need an area for elimination such as a litterbox or potty pads.

For travel, smaller crates are better because if the crate is jostled, such as a rapid braking maneuver in a vehicle, there is less risk of the animal being thrown inside the crate and injured. Larger crates are often chosen for confinement in the home.

Your dog needs daily social interaction as well as physical and mental exercise to remain healthy. Crating or planned confinement is a management tool for times when your dog cannot be supervised or needs a quiet rest period. Make sure your dog receives plenty of opportunities for training, exercise, and social interaction. Extended periods of confinement are not healthy for animals.

How do I train my dog to use its crate?

Positive reinforcement training is the best way to help pets learn to accept confinement. Before a training session, make sure your dog has had exercise and an opportunity to eliminate.

To begin training, place the crate in an area where the family congregates so that your dog has company. You may choose to have one crate or pen in the main living area of the home and a second in the bedroom for sleeping at night.

Make the crate a place for quiet enjoyment. Think of ways to encourage happy, still behavior. Ideas include:



- Feed your dog's meals inside the crate from an interactive toy or slow feeding bowl.
- Offer edible chews and food-stuffed toys in the crate.
- Provide safe chew toys in the crate.
- Reward quiet behavior by periodically dropping a treat through an opening in the back of the crate, or by using a remote reward system such as a Pet Tutor® or Treat and Train™.
- When you progress to leaving your dog in the crate during alone time or separation, monitor with a camera for the first few separations to ensure they are not in distress when alone.

At first, leave the crate door open when providing happy, quiet experiences. After a few sessions, your puppy or dog will readily enter the crate. ^

Next, while they are busy chewing or playing with the food toy, close the door and sit nearby.

Finally, after a few successful sessions, close the door and leave the room. Try to return while they are still chewing and take a seat nearby or open the door. Gradually increase the time that your dog is crated so that they are able to relax in the crate even after they are finished the food toy.

It is normal for some dogs to vocalize briefly, paw the crate door, or act fidgety when confined, especially when confinement is new. Observe from a distance. If the behavior lasts a short time and does not escalate, watch and wait to see if your dog will settle. If possible, avoid letting your dog out while they are vocalizing or scratching, as they will learn that those behaviors result in being released. However, if signs of significant distress are present, you will need to let your dog out and then create a new treatment strategy. You may share a short video of the behavior with your veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist. They can help you design a well tolerated treatment modification.

Make the crate a place for quiet enjoyment.

If your puppy or dog has been quietly resting, then awakes and begins to fidget or vocalize, consider whether they may need to eliminate. If it is time for a potty break, take your puppy outside for a quiet, calm elimination break on-leash. This should be a business outing, not a time for attention. Avoid letting the puppy run through the yard or play. After eliminating, offer praise and then return them to the crate for a small treat. In a few minutes, they should settle down and sleep again. Calm, quiet, brief elimination breaks will teach your puppy to communicate when they need to go out, but that waking the family

during the night will not lead to playtime. Young puppies often need a break during the night to go out until they are old enough to hold their bladder and bowels through the night.

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Can I train my dog to get into the crate on cue?

Once your dog willingly goes into the crate, it is time to introduce a cue to ask them to enter. Set up a few training sessions each day.



1. Pick up a few pieces of kibble or small training treats.
2. Toss a treat inside the crate - your dog should enter eagerly.
3. Once your dog goes inside, use a marker word such as "Yes!" or "Good!" and drop 2-3 more treats into the crate. Then toss a treat out so she leaves the crate, giving you a chance to train some more.
4. Repeat the process, continuing to deliver treats every few seconds, to lengthen the time your dog remains in the crate. Then toss a treat out so your dog exits. Try to have 3 or 4 repetitions per session.
5. Once your dog is predictably and eagerly trotting into the crate, add the verbal cue: quietly toss the treat into the crate and the moment your dog begins to run toward her crate, say "kennel".
6. After a few sessions, hold a treat and say "kennel" before you even toss the treat, to be sure your dog understands they must first enter the crate to get the treat.
7. Finally, practice closing the door and delivering a few treats several seconds apart. At this point, begin to lengthen the time your dog spends in the crate, as described in the previous section.
8. If you have already taught "sit" or "down," send your dog to the crate, close the door, then ask for a sit or down, and then treat. While your dog is sitting quietly, open the door and release with a

new cue such as “free” or “okay”. If your dog tries to rush out before you have given the release cue, calmly close the door, wait a few seconds, and try again. Only open the door when your dog is sitting still. This teaches a safe, controlled exit from the crate. Waiting until released is especially



Practice from further and further distances until your dog will happily run to the crate from anywhere in the home.

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