

Crate Training



I highly recommend crate training for all dogs and puppies. It might look like a cage to you and I, but I urge you to think from your dog's perspective.

The large majority of dogs love their crates. The crate is their safe and cosy haven. Anxious or fearful dogs can seek refuge in times of stress. Dogs in busy family homes can escape for a little down-time and a place to sleep undisturbed. The crate provides familiar comfort during times of new or unusual experiences such as car or aeroplane travel or when staying away from home.

A secured crate is the safest way for dogs to travel in vehicles.

A crate trained dog can be included in more family activities.

Crate training assists the development of independence which may provide some protection against the development of anxieties and their related behavioural problems.

Crate training is a necessity for assistance and companion dogs in order to meet compliance for hospital visits, etc. For most of these organisations, including Young Diggers, crate training is compulsory. These dogs may find themselves in various unusual situations and the crate will provide familiar comfort.

Size Matters

We do not want the dog to be cramped in his crate. We want the dog to be able to stand up and turn around. However, the crate will lose its “safe-haven” or “den” feeling if it is too big. If at all possible, take the dog with you to the pet shop to make the purchase. Stand the dog beside the crate at the shop for measurement purposes. Do *not* attempt to get him into the crate at the shop.

If buying for a puppy, you might need to estimate his adult size and buy appropriately. You can reduce the size of the crate for now, by securing a cardboard box in the back of the crate. This is particularly important if you are using the crate to assist with toilet training. If the crate is too big, the puppy will simply toilet at the back of the crate and sleep at the front away from his mess. The right sized crate will encourage the puppy to keep his sleeping quarters clean.

Positioning the Crate at Home

Position the crate in a social area of the home out of the thoroughfare. Locating the crate in a position where you have seen the dog or puppy relax previously, will be beneficial. Place some comfy bedding inside and leave the door open.

If you have chosen a wire crate, you might like to consider covering it with a towel or sheet to provide the “cosy-haven” or “den” feeling.

Crate Training

Ensure the dog is ready for learning. He’s recently had a toilet break and a drink. It’s been at least twelve hours since his last meal. He is relaxed in the training environment. There are no competing distractions.

Training sessions should be short and highly successful. Three to five minutes is plenty for dogs that are inexperienced in training procedures. For dogs that have participated in many training scenarios previously, ten minutes is suitable. Ensure the dog relaxes, preferably sleeping, between training sessions to absorb the new learning.

Seat yourself two to three metres for small dogs, further for larger dogs, away from the crate with a supply of your dog’s favourite training treats (and your clicker if using one).

Look for the dog showing any interest in the crate, even if he is just looking in the direction of the crate from a distance; say “good” (or “yes” or use a clicker) and then immediately toss a food treat in a direction that will have the dog move away from the

crate to retrieve it. Once he has retrieved and eaten his food treat, he will be likely to move towards the crate again. Once more you will mark, “good” and then immediately throw a treat away from the crate.

Repeat this process, gradually having the dog move closer to the crate before you “good” and toss the treat. Before you know it, the dog will be stepping into the crate and then fully entering the crate. You will “good” and toss the food outside the crate so that the dog has to come out of the crate to retrieve the treat. He will return to the crate in order to prompt the next “good” and treat.

Now you can start delaying the “good” and treat - initially, wait just two seconds of being in the crate and then gradually increase but keep the duration varied as to when you will “good” and treat.

Introduce a cue to send the dog into the crate. When the dog has swallowed the previous treat, say your cue word such as “bed” or “crate”. Your aim is to have the cue word precede the dog’s action of running into his crate. As usual you will “good” and treat on correct performance.

Once your dog is confidently and consistently going into the crate, you can now treat him inside the crate so that he doesn’t have to run out to retrieve the treat. The longer he remains in the crate, the more treats he will receive.

Start closing the door. You could use a food-filled toy or a raw, meaty bone to enhance your dog’s feelings about being confined in a crate. Cue the dog to enter the crate, give him the goodie and then close the door. Stay with him. After a few minutes, open the door, take the toy or bone away and encourage the dog to come out. Being in the crate is good because he has access to his toy/bone. Send him back to his crate and give him his toy/ bone once inside again. Repeat the process occasionally throughout the time it takes to finish the toy/bone.

If your dog or puppy is not comfortably allowing you to take his toy/bone, please contact your professional dog trainer immediately for appropriate advice on resource guarding. Under no circumstances, should you attempt to reprimand or punish a dog or puppy for guarding, even if he is displaying aggression. Avoid the situation until the issue is resolved.

Leaving the Dog Alone in a Crate

He’s not ready for you to leave him alone yet! Take it slowly!

If we have built a pleasant and relaxed association in the dog’s mind to being confined in the crate, we are now ready to begin the desensitisation process of leaving him alone in the crate.

If at any time during this procedure, the dog goes into a panic, it is imperative that the current level is ceased and the handler returns to the close vicinity of the dog in the

crate without actually returning to the dog. You could use your happy, confident voice to allay the dog's fears: "Sorry Mate, too much, too soon? My mistake. Just relax; I'm back."

The desensitisation process for crate training will follow a similar progression as for the Tie-up or Restraint Exercise, where the dog or puppy is desensitised to being restrained by lead and then left alone (see separate document).

Initially, stay with the dog in the crate. When he is showing that he is comfortable, proceed to moving around the room. Look out for any signs that the dog is no longer completely comfortable i.e. licking his lips/nose, yawning or becoming unsettled. These signs are early indicators of stress; you might need to slow down a little.

Throughout the desensitisation process, we aim to induce mild levels of stress only. Repeated exposures to a *mild* stress-inducing situation will eventually result in that situation no longer inducing *any* level of stress. The dog's threshold for dealing with this previously stressful situation has been raised. It will now take a higher intensity of this situation to induce a *mild* level of stress.

So.. let's subject the dog to a slightly more intense situation. Move further away from the crate and keep your back to the dog. Repeat this level until it also no longer induces *any* level of stress. Now let's try leaving the room.. for half a second. Just as you disappear out of sight around the doorframe, reappear immediately. Repeat this process a dozen times, randomly, until it also no longer induces any level of stress. Now you can start to hesitate for the count of two, before reappearing.

Crate Training a Litter of Puppies

Dog breeders who condition their puppies to enjoy being in a crate, give the new owner and the puppy a huge head-start.

Place several puppy-size crates in the playpen/yard area, with the doors open for the puppies to come and go. At this point, the puppies are simply becoming familiar with the crates in their familiar environment. They will want to explore them and will find them comfortable for sleeping.

If the puppies have experienced pleasant events such as special food-filled toys and raw- meaty bones, as outlined above, it will be a simple matter at this sensitive time in their lives to develop a love of their crates.

Puppies will need regular toilet breaks. Remember that the crate is a great tool in toilet training endeavours because of the canine's natural propensity to be clean. This will be over-ridden if the puppy is forced to toilet in the crate. If a puppy suddenly starts to vocalise whilst confined in the crate, there is a good chance he needs to toilet. Let him out!

Also...

- Ensure the dog is not spending excessive time in the crate. Even if he is enjoying stimulating toys and activities in his crate, he needs to spend time exploring his world outside the crate.
- Being confined in a crate and unable to follow a particular person around or engage in an obsessive pursuit, can be a means of assisting sleep-deprived dogs gain much needed deep sleep.
- The crate can be used as a “time-out” punishment for undesired behaviour. I have never found that the dog then develops a negative association to the crate. I believe the punishment aspect is the loss of whatever the dog was enjoying through his inappropriate behaviour. It could simply be the loss of freedom.
- Time-out punishments should be short; the dog will have forgotten why he is in the crate after only five or ten seconds. Release the dog back to the scenario and teach him what you would like him to do instead of the undesired behaviour.
- Crate training is a great tool for developing independence in a dog or puppy. Development of independence allows the dog to feel safe and comfortable when left alone. Particularly in puppies, independence development provides some protection against developing separation anxiety. Also see separate document titled, “The Tie- up or Restraint Exercise”, for further help in this area.
- A crate can provide relief and a sanctuary from children or other stressors in the dog or puppy’s home environment. Ensure that children are taught that the dog or puppy is not to be disturbed or pursued when he chooses to be in his crate. He needs some quiet time.

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