

Your complete guide to natural dog care and training

WholeDog Journal™

Crate Training Made Easy



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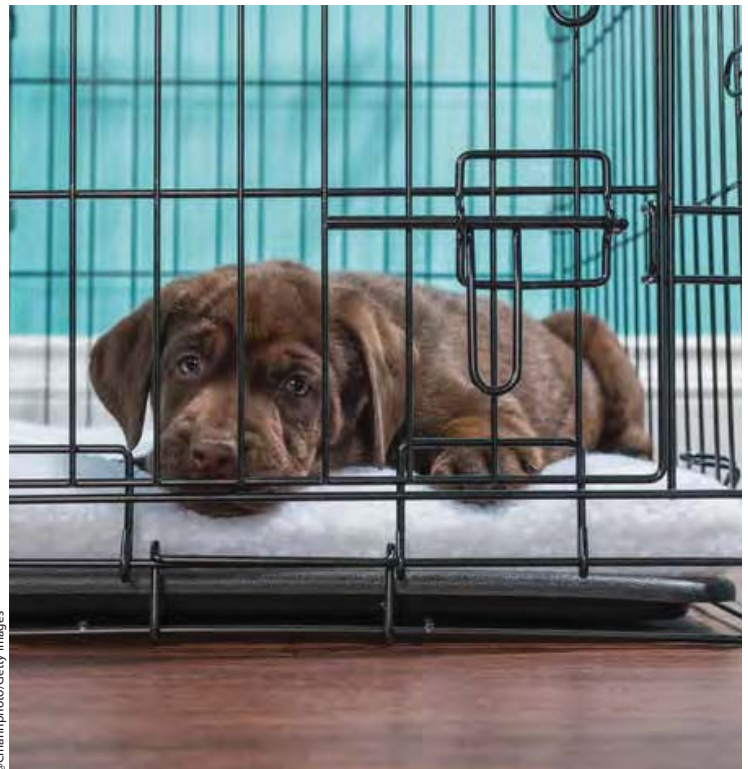
Understanding the Basics of Crate Training

Teaching your new dog or puppy these critical lessons will benefit him for his entire life. Here's why.

Several decades ago, I got a new puppy. Keli was an Australian Kelpie, acquired by the Marin Humane Society to be my Canine Field Agent, partner and assistant in my daily duties as an Animal Services Officer. Being selected for this program was a huge honor and responsibility. I was determined to do everything right in caring for and training my pup.

I had heard about a new technique in puppy-raising, called crate training, where you put your dog in a small kennel at night, and whenever you had to leave him alone. I was skeptical. Put a puppy in a cage? It sounded cruel! Still, determined to provide cutting-edge care for my pup in this cutting-edge program, I decided to try it. After all, the puppy would be with me most of the time in the animal services truck, so we were really only talking about nighttime crating. Unconvinced but determined to try, prior to bringing the pup home I purchased a crate and set it up in my bedroom.

When I brought the 10-week-old pup home, I braced myself for the two most trying challenges of puppy-raising: house training and chewing. I was about to be pleasantly surprised. The first night in her crate, Keli cried for a few minutes – typical behavior on the first night away from her mother and littermates. But then she curled up and went to sleep.



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Canines are den animals and a crate is a modern den — a dog's personal portable bedroom that he can retire to when he wants to relax or rest.

At 2 a.m. she woke me with insistent crying. She was telling me she needed to go out – WOW! I got up, took her out to pee, then returned her to the crate and went back to bed. After another perfunctory period of protest she went back to sleep. When I woke up the next morning her crate was clean, I didn't have to worry about stepping in – or cleaning up – puppy piles or puddles, and thanks to the boundaries of the crate, there were no chewed up shoes or electrical cords. My skepticism started to fade.

Two nights later it vanished completely when I went to put Keli in her crate and found Caper, my three-year-old Bull Terrier mix, already curled up on the soft pad in Keli's airline kennel. Caper looked up at me and thumped her tail several times, clearly saying, "These are cool! Can I have one of my own?" I went out the following day and bought Caper her own crate, and I've been a crate convert ever since.

HOME SWEET CRATE

The crate is a sturdy plastic, fiberglass, wood, metal or wire box just big enough for a dog to stand up, turn around and lie down in comfortably. It can be used with the door open, at your convenience, or with the door closed, when mandatory confinement is called for.

When the crate is properly introduced using positive training methods, most dogs love their

crates. Canines are den animals and a crate is a modern den – a dog's personal portable bedroom that he can retire to when he wants to escape from the trials and tribulations of toddlers and other torments. He can take it with him when he stays at boarding kennels, and when he travels with you and sleeps in hotels and motels.

Owners love crates because they generally make house training a breeze and prevent damage to the house, furnishings, and personal possessions. They can give a new puppy-owner peace of mind when Baby Buddy has to be left home alone. They can be used for a positive time-out when visitors tire of Buddy's antics, or when he insists on begging at the dinner table.

The crate is also a great tool for convincing owners of backyard dogs to bring their hounds into their homes (where they belong). By bringing the dog indoors but keeping him confined, at least at night, hesitant owners can ease their fears about mayhem and ruined rugs while at least partially integrating the deprived dog into the family

POINTERS ABOUT CRATE TRAINING

A crate is an invaluable management tool. It is an artificial den for your dog that makes housetraining a breeze and gives your dog a safe place where he can stay. Here are some tips to remember:

- ◆ It should never be a place of punishment.
- ◆ Your dog may adjust more easily to stays at the vet hospital when he can take his portable bedroom with him.
- ◆ Puppies can be crate trained with relative ease, so start early.
- ◆ Crates should be just large enough for your dog to stand up, turn around, and lie down comfortably.
- ◆ Start with the door open and just toss the treats inside.
- ◆ Gradually toss the treats further and further until he is stepping in to get them. At this point you can use verbal cues, such as "go to bed".
- ◆ When your dog is staying in the crate with the door closed for at least 10 seconds without any signs of anxiety, close the door and latch it. Then step away from the crate.
- ◆ When you are not actively training, leave the crate door open.

IT IS NOT A PRISON

A crate is not a place of punishment. Never force your dog or puppy into a crate in anger. Even if he has earned a time-out through inappropriate behavior, don't yell at him, throw him in the crate, and slam the door. Instead, quietly remove the dog from the scene and invite him into his crate to give both of you an opportunity to calm down.

Nor is a crate appropriate for long-term confinement. While some puppies are able to make it through an eight-hour stretch in a crate at night, you should be sleeping nearby and available to take your pup out if he tells you he needs to go.

During the day, a puppy should not be asked to stay in a crate longer than two to four hours at a time; an adult dog no more than six to eight hours. Longer than that and you risk forcing Buddy to eliminate in his crate, which is a very bad thing, since it breaks down his instinctive

inhibitions against soiling his den. Dogs who learn to soil their dens can be extremely difficult, sometimes nearly impossible, to house train – a common behavior problem for puppies from unclean puppy mills.

TRAINING DO'S AND DONT'S

Most puppies, even the majority of adult dogs, can be crate-trained with relative ease. Remember that the crate should be just large enough for your dog to stand up, turn around, and lie down comfortably. He doesn't need to be able to play football in it. If you want to get one large enough for your puppy to grow into, block off the back so he has just enough room, and increase the space as he grows. Cover the floor of the crate with a rug or soft pad to make it comfortable and inviting, and you're ready to begin training.

Start with the crate door open, and toss some irresistibly yummy treats inside. If he is hesitant to go in after them, toss the treats close enough to the doorway that he can stand outside and just poke his nose in the crate to eat them. If you are training with a clicker or other reward marker, each time he eats a treat, Click! the clicker (or say "Yes!" if you are using a verbal marker).

Gradually toss the treats farther and farther into the crate until he steps inside to get them. Continue to Click! each time he eats a treat. When he enters the crate easily to get the treats, Click! and offer him a treat while he is still inside. If he is willing to stay inside, keep clicking and treating. If he comes out that's okay too, just toss another treat inside and wait for him to re-enter. Don't try to force him to stay in the crate.

When he enters the crate to get the treat without hesitation, you can start using a verbal cue such as "Go to bed" as he goes in, so that you will eventually be able to send him into his crate on just a verbal cue. When he happily stays in the crate in anticipation of a Click! and treat, gently swing the door closed. Don't latch it! Click! and treat, then open the door. Repeat this step, gradually increasing the length of time the



Dogs who have positive crate experiences when they're young almost always hang out in their crates quite readily and happily.

door stays closed before you Click! Sometimes you can Click! and reward without opening the door right away.

When your dog will stay in the crate with the door closed for at least 10 seconds without any signs of anxiety, close the door, latch it, and take one step away from the crate. Click!, return to the crate, reward, and open the door. Repeat this step, varying the time and distance you leave the crate.

Don't always make it longer and farther – intersperse long ones with shorter ones, so it doesn't always get harder and harder for him. Start increasing the number of times you Click! and treat without opening the door, but remember that a Click! or a "Yes!" always gets a treat.

It's a good idea to leave the crate open when you aren't actively training. Toss treats and his favorite toys in the crate when he's not looking, so he never knows what wonderful surprises

he might find there. You can even feed him his meals in the crate – with the door open – to help him realize that his crate is a truly wonderful place.

If at any time during the program your dog whines or fusses about being in the crate, don't let him out until he stops crying! This is the biggest mistake owners make when crate training! If you let Buddy out when he is fussing, you will teach him that fussing gets him free.

If, however, he panics to the point of risking injury to himself, you must let him out. You may have a dog with a separation anxiety challenge. A crate is generally not recommended for dogs with separation anxiety, since they tend to panic in close confinement. If you believe your dog has a separation anxiety problem, stop the crate training and consult a behaviorist or a trainer who has experience with this behavior.

Instead of letting your dog out whenever he



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Crate training can be an extremely valuable behavior management tool. But if you abuse it by too much confinement or using it as punishment, your dog may learn to dislike it.

fusses or whines, wait for a few seconds of quiet, then Click! and reward. Then back up a step or two in the training program until he is again successful at the task you've set out for him. When your dog is doing well at that level again, increase the difficulty in smaller increments, and vary the amount of time, rather than making it progressively longer. For example, instead of going from 5 seconds to 10 to 15, start with 5 seconds, then 7, then 3, then 8, and so on

HOW TO MAINTAIN SUCCESS

Sometimes dogs and often puppies can do the whole crate training program in one day. Some will take several days, and a few will take weeks or more. Once your dog is crate trained, you have a valuable behavior management tool for life. Respect it. If you abuse it by keeping Buddy confined too much, for too long a period of time, or by using it as punishment, he may learn to dislike it. Even though he goes to bed willingly and on cue, reward him often enough to keep the response happy and quick. Keep your verbal "Go To Bed" cue light and happy. Don't ever let anyone tease or punish him in his crate. (Kids can be especially obnoxious about this. Watch them!)

All of my dogs quickly learn the "Go to bed" routine. I don't even have to use the verbal cue; usually, when I emerge from brushing my teeth, they are already curled up in their crates for the night. 🐾

Your complete guide to natural dog care and training
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A Crate Training Overview

There are plenty of good reasons for crate training your dog, including safety.

As the editor of the *Whole Dog Journal*, I am a huge fan of crate training for dogs. I think the ability to spend an extended amount of time in an enclosed space quietly and calmly is a valuable life skill for dogs. And it certainly has dozens of benefits for us, too. These benefits include:

- ◆ Dog has safe space where he can't be bothered by other dogs or household pets or people.
- ◆ Dog has a safe place to enjoy a bone or food-stuffed Kong, without worrying about having it taken away from him.
- ◆ Dog has a comfortable, enclosed place to nap or sleep – somehow reminiscent of the canine's evolutionary den.
- ◆ In an emergency or in the case of an injury that requires the dog to be kept quiet, the dog can be safely contained, keeping him out of harm's way in a familiar, comforting environment. This point is really important to me. In California, I've lived in areas that suffered week-long floods and fires that burned tens of thousands of acres. I was living in San Francisco when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck in 1989, sparking fires that destroyed dozens of homes.

I have friends in the Bay Area who had to evacuate their neighborhood after a gas pipeline explosion a few months ago. I haven't yet needed to evacuate my pets, but I could if I had to – and I wouldn't have to worry that my dog was traumatized and freaking out because he was put into a crate. I also feel much better knowing that if he's ever confined

to a crate for a hospitalization or recovery from an injury, he'll be absolutely content and comfortable.

◆ If the dog is boarded or has to stay overnight or for an extended stay at a veterinary hospital, he'll be much less anxious if he's well habituated to his crate. My friend and trainer Sarah Richardson, of The Canine Connection in Chico, California, puts it this way: "It's like eating at McDonalds in a foreign country – a familiar place where they can relax and know what to expect."

Richardson also operates a daycare and boarding facility. She says there is a striking difference between dogs who are crate-trained and those who are not. "Daycare and boarding can be exciting for a dog, but they can also be stressful. Crate-trained dogs always seem grateful for some rest and relaxation in the midst of a stimulating stay here, and they come out of the crate refreshed and ready to play again. The crate has become their cue for relaxation. It's much more difficult for dogs



These dogs can help make traveling much more pleasant because they're already used to being confined safely in their crates.

who aren't crate-trained to fully relax and sleep well when they are in unfamiliar surroundings."

- ◆ Peace of mind that a comfortably crated dog can't destroy one's house or car.

- ◆ As a testament for all the reasons to train your dog to perform a rock-solid sit, trainer Ian Dunbar often cites a list of things that a dog can't do when it is sitting, such as jumping up, humping your leg, getting in a fight, etc. The list of things a dog can't do while crated is even longer, and includes chewing through electrical cords, stealing your socks, getting into the garbage, tormenting the cat, and peeing behind the sofa.

Also, I was caring for a friend's dog once, and left him in my car for a short time while occupied with something else. When I came back, I found that he had chewed through every seat belt in the car. I don't leave dogs uncrated in my car any more!



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There are different styles of dog crates, but the most common and affordable ones are made of metal or plastic.

- ◆ Crates are a valuable tool for house-training a dog. Few dogs will soil their crates if they can help it. After each stint in a crate, take them directly outdoors to potty. If they don't go, bring them back inside and pop them right back into the crate. If they do potty, reward them lavishly, and allow them to be free in the house for a while – but only about as much time as it might take for them to need to go potty again. At that point (and it depends on their age, when and how much they eat and drink, and other factors that you will know best), take them back outdoors. If they go potty, reward them again. If they don't, back into the crate they go.

- ◆ A crate and crate-trained dog ensure that you and your dog will be welcome at most friends' and relatives' homes. I recently stayed at a friend's house over the holidays, with my foster dog! She doesn't have enough training or self-control to abstain from chasing a strange cat, eating the cat's food, chewing on the furniture, or stealing food off the table, but none of these things happened, because she was happy to spend all of her unsupervised time in their home in her crate. My friend commented, "We're crate-training our next dog, for sure!"

- ◆ Crates enable me (and others) to foster dogs from the shelter. I can say in all confidence that at least five dogs have found really great homes because I took the time to house and train them, and find just the right family to adopt them. If I didn't have a safe place to put an untrained dog at night, or even just while I run to the grocery store, I wouldn't be able to provide this service.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR CRATING

You'll need a few things to get started on the crate-training project. First and foremost, you need the right crate. There are three major types that are appropriate for training: plastic (or aluminum) airline-style crates; wire crates (they look like cages); and "furniture" style or "fashion" crates that are disguised to blend in with your decorating motif. Most dog owners choose a utilitarian (and affordable) plastic or wire crate; the aluminum and fashion models cost upwards of \$500. (There are also "soft" fabric crates; these are appropriate only for dogs whose crate-training is rock-solid, since a

determined or panicked dog can very easily chew or scratch his way through the mesh and escape.)

Each of the two most popular types offer one major benefit. Plastic crates seem to evoke the “den” feeling for the dog; many dogs accept being in a solid-seeming structure more readily than being in an airy cage. Wire cages offer more flexibility in where you can put them; most have at least two doors and some have three. This helps you position the crate in just about any corner or cranny in your home. Dogs will generally accept either type of crate, if you introduce the dog to the crate properly and don’t abuse or overuse crating.

The crate you buy needs to be large enough to permit your dog to comfortably enter, stand, turn around, and sleep in his favorite position. If he can’t get comfortable, the odds of his acceptance of the crate are poor! Measure your dog’s height and length; don’t rely on your memory and estimation of his size when ordering. If you’re in doubt, get the next size up. More room is always better, with the following exception: buying a crate for your medium- to large-breed puppy.

Knowing that your pup is going to stand 26 inches or so at the shoulder, and weigh 80 or more pounds, you select a very large crate. It’s good to plan ahead, right? Yes, but in the here and now, instead of providing a snug little studio apartment, we’ve supplied that puppy with a vast loft, complete with what he may perceive as a backyard bathroom. In other words, if he has just enough space to feel comfortable, he’ll make an effort to “hold it” in order to keep his bed clean. If he has too much real estate, he’ll probably start using some of it for going potty.

Most wire crates can be ordered with a divider panel that allows you to “fence off” some of that extra space while the puppy is little, and gradually expand the room he needs. I’ve never seen a plastic airline crate that offers this feature, although I’ve known owners who actually bought a small crate for the pup, and a larger one when he was older, larger, and already reliably crate-trained.

Next, find a good place for your dog’s crate. It should be situated in a place that is neither too



WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- ✓ When doing early crate training, don't let your dog out of the crate when he is whining or barking. Even if you're really certain he needs to go potty, try to wait for a few moments of silence before opening the door.
- ✓ Always use the crate as a rewarding place, not a punishing one! If you use it consistently for "time outs" rather than "time in with a Kong," your dog will likely start to resent and avoid it.

hot (next to a heater vent or in direct sun from a window), nor too cold (on a concrete floor in a chilly room or in a breezy, unheated hall). Remember that the dog will be stuck in that one temperature zone; you are depriving him of the ability to get up and move to a more temperate location, so the spot should be pretty comfortable.

Consider, also, your dog’s temperament and the traffic flow in your home. If your dog gets overstimulated by the sight and sounds of your kids’ playing and running with their friends, put the crate somewhere out of the flow of traffic. But if your dog gets a little anxious when he’s left alone, put his crate close to the center of action in your home, so he can be reassured as much as possible by the sounds of someone cooking in the kitchen or the television.

Note that if your dog displays serious anxiety when separated from the family, and hurts himself, destroys the crate, eliminates in the crate, and/or vocalizes nonstop, you’ll need the services of an experienced animal behavior professional to help properly diagnose and treat the behavior. (See “Don’t Crate Dogs With Severe Anxiety” on page 10 of this article.)

The next thing you need to do is make sure that the crate is an incredibly cozy and inviting space for your dog. It should be equipped with a thick, comfortable bed or pad – not a thin little towel. The only exception to this would be for dogs who chew, eat, or otherwise destroy their beds; then you might have to experiment to find something that is comfortable but resistant to chewing. My dog is attracted to chewing up foam-filled beds, so I bought two of the thick, fuzzy “EcoNap” mats (not one of the many thin imitations) from West Paw Design. Otto is comfortable and the washable beds are still intact and attractive after two whole years.

The only acceptable reason (from my view) for not providing your dog with a thick bed in his crate? Very young puppies and a few adult dogs sometimes prefer peeing on a soft surface; you might have to eliminate padding for them, which means you have to keep the crate somewhere warm (in cold weather). You also should shorten the time you leave these individuals in a crate so they don’t feel the need to eliminate in their dens.

The last things you need for successful crate-training are a good supply of safe and attractive chew items and/or food-stuffed toys, such as Kongs or one of the stuffable “Busy Buddy” toys from Premier Pet Products.

DON'T CRATE DOGS WITH SEVERE ANXIETY

It’s a dilemma: A dog with severe separation anxiety may destroy their homes in a desperate effort to distract and console themselves when he is in the midst of an attack of separation anxiety. He may eat couch cushions, claw his way through drywall, attempt to crash through windows, and/or urinate and defecate all over the house. Sound like a dog you’d like to put in a crate? Actually, probably not.

Some dogs actually suffer worse symptoms when they are not only left alone, but also, when locked in a crate, are deprived of the things that might make them feel a bit better, like lying on your bed or sofa, or being able to look out the living room window from time to time. Most trainers have heard at least one sad story from a desperate owner whose dog mutilated himself — with

bloody paws or even broken teeth — in an all-out panic to escape a crate.

“Crating is completely inappropriate for many, if not most, dogs who have true separation anxiety,” warns WDJ’s Training Editor Pat Miller. “Those with lesser levels of stress behavior about being left alone may be able to tolerate the close confinement of a crate, but for dogs who are truly panicked about being by themselves, crates seem to intensify their anxiety. Crating can worsen the separation anxiety behavior, and the dog can injure himself seriously, or even be killed, in his desperate attempts to escape his prison.”

A dog whose symptoms of separation distress are this severe will require some professional help, perhaps in the form of anxiety-reducing medication and the help of an experienced veterinary behaviorist.

CRATE TRAINING YOUR DOG STEP BY STEP

Start the crate-training program by giving your dog some really over-the-top, delicious treats in the crate. Or, if he won’t go in, feed him the treats at the crate’s entrance. Slowly lure him into the crate with these treats, reinforcing each approach with praise – but don’t close the door! In his first dozen or so experiences with the crate, he should be free to enter and exit at will. If you slam the door on him before he even knows what it’s all about, he’ll be double-wary of approaching again. There is no hurry.

As soon as your dog is enthusiastically entering the crate in anticipation of goodies, ask him for a sit or down before you give him the treat. After a few repetitions of this, ask for a sit or down, swing the door closed for a few seconds, and then open it and pop that treat into his mouth. Good dog!

Your goal is to reward him for increasingly longer stays in the crate, but don’t increase the length of every visit to the crate. Keep the duration unpredictable, and the rewards variable.

At this point – but in a whole new session, not when he’s already stuffed with treats – prepare a really special food-stuffed Kong or other toy. Layer it with several yummy, stinky foods, such as

anchovies, cream cheese, and bacon. Show this wonderful concoction to your dog, and then make a show of carrying it to the crate. Place it in the crate, far enough inside that your dog can't snatch it and run out.

If your dog enters in a relaxed manner and picks up the toy and starts chewing, go ahead and close the crate door. Stay close, though; it's too soon to leave him all alone in there, even if he's absorbed by the food in the toy at the moment.

If he doesn't go right in, close the door to the crate, locking him out of the crate and preventing him from eating the delicious food that you stuffed into the toy. In the best case scenario, he walks around the crate, trying to figure out how he can get in and get that treat. If he goes in the next time you open the door (and pick up the toy, and maybe even let him to lick it before putting it back in the crate), great. Close the door and proceed as above. If he still doesn't go in, go back to the high-value treats and the shorter trips in and out of the crate. At no time should you forcibly drag, pull, or push your dog into the crate.

Depending on your dog's comfort in the crate, have him go in the crate to enjoy a special treat (such as a big meaty bone, his favorite bully stick, or a food-stuffed toy) for increasingly longer sessions, several times a day. At first, stay close by while he's locked in. Enter and exit the room, but gradually increase the amount of time that he's in the crate in a room alone. Build the sessions to the point where you can actually leave your home for short, and then longer errands. As long as he seems happy to enter the crate and comfortable once in there, keep building on these sessions. If he's reluctant to enter, or gets so preoccupied by his captivity that he starts whining or pawing at the gate, keep the sessions shorter, the treats high-value, and stay closer.

Here's an important point: When you let your dog out of the crate, don't make a big deal out of it. If you treat him like the three-month survivor of a raft at sea, he's going to look forward to getting out of the crate so he can be the star of that particular newsreel. Instead, don't make eye contact as you approach the crate, casually open



If your dog won't go into the crate, feed him favorite treats at the crate's entrance. Slowly lure him into the crate with treats and praise — but don't close the door!

the door, and ignore him for a few minutes when he comes out. You might even find that he doesn't come out; that means you are really on the right track with the whole "comfortable in the crate" project.

What about the dog who barks, whines, or paws at the door during his longer sessions in the crate? You have to use your best judgment. Does he seem completely panicked or just a bit upset? Does he have to go potty immediately, or not at all? If you ascertain that he's putting on a big act — he's not panicked, just not happy, and he doesn't have to go potty — then you will have to steel yourself for listening to a bit of fussing (or even some unpleasant barking). If you let him out in the middle of a frustrated tantrum, you will have just reinforced tantrums, and the next one may well be louder and longer.

Instead, lurk close by so that you can leap to release your dog when his whining or barking stopped for a few moments. Try your hardest to



@DanBrandenburg/Getty Images

What if your dog barks, whines, or paws at the door during his longer sessions in the crate? If you let him out during a tantrum, you will be reinforcing that behavior. Wait for him to be quiet, if even briefly.

reinforce him for longer and longer periods of silence.

CRATE SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

I don't want to scare you away from crating. But if you are going to employ this valuable management tool, you need to do so in a responsible manner. Take steps to avoid whatever hazards that crating may present to your dog.

Use an ID tag pouch, or an alternative to conventional, dangling ID tags — but don't forego identification. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would have been skeptical that it could even happen, but my most recent foster dog caught her ID tag in the slats of a plastic crate. It's a testament to her acceptance of the crate that she neither panicked, fought, nor even whined. I opened the crate the other evening and realized she was sitting with an odd, hunched posture. I thought, "Uh oh," but I was thinking about bloat. I patted my leg to encourage her to come out of the crate. She wriggled, but maintained her odd posture. I got down on my knees to take a closer look — and that's when I saw that her ID tag was stuck, wedged

in one of the crate vents; she was being tightly held there against the wall. I'm a huge advocate of having ID on a dog at all times, but now I feel that it's best if the dog wears a breakaway collar, or that some sort of alternative to a dangling tag is used.

Maintain safe temperatures for your dog. It's your job to make sure that your dog doesn't roast or freeze in his crate, because there is precious little he will be able to do to help himself get cooler or warmer when he's locked into a small space.

Provide water. There are only a few reasons to withhold water from a dog in a crate — and no valid reason to keep him without water for more than a couple of hours. Often, people who are trying to housetrain a puppy don't want the pup to be able to "tank up" and later urinate in their crates. It's safer to set your alarm to let the puppy go outside and pee once in the middle of the night than to prevent him from drinking for eight or more hours in one stretch — especially in hot weather.

If you're concerned about the water spilling and making a mess, try one of those hamster-style water bottles that dogs have to lick to get a drink (available at pet supply stores) — or better yet, give the non-spilling Buddy Bowl a try. Your dog can flip this bowl completely upside down and still the water won't pour out. The Buddy Bowl is widely available at pet supply stores and Internet sites.

One last point: Don't overcrate your dog. Crates are a great tool, but they can be overused. When you walk toward the crate and your dog suddenly runs the other way, you need to increase the fun of crating, and decrease the time he spends in it. Also, keep in mind that puppies can't "hold it" for all that long. A rule of thumb for pups during the day for up to one hour longer than they are months old. (A three-month old puppy should be able to hold it for four hours.)

I said at the beginning of this article that the ability to calmly spend time in a crate is a valuable life skill. And yet, in an average month, my own dog doesn't spend much time (if any) in a closed crate. Why? Because he spends so much time in his open, well-padded crate that I rarely need to close its door! 🐾

How to Overcome Crate Training Difficulties

Here are ways to help your dog find contentment in the close quarters of a crate.

The topic turned to crating on one of my trainer e-mail lists recently. I was horrified to read that some shelters and rescue groups refuse to adopt to prospective owners who intend to use a crate with their dogs. What madness is this?

As I followed the discussion, I realized that the negative crate perspective stemmed from concerns of “overcrating.” Apparently some owners crate their dogs all day while they’re at work, let them out for a couple of hours when they come home, and then crate the dogs all night while everyone is sleeping. This, some shelters fear, is too much time in a crate for a dog’s physical and mental health.

The crate is an invaluable management tool. Like any training tool, however, it can be misused. Even when used properly, it’s not necessarily the appropriate tool for every dog in every circumstance. The discussion that follows may help you decide when, and whether, it’s the right choice for you and your canine pal

THE PROBLEM OF OVERCRATING

A properly used crate can be the answer to your housetraining prayers. I was astounded by the ease with which I was able to housetrain my Kelpie pup. I also, however, was in the enviable position of being able to take my baby dog to work with me, so I was never tempted – or compelled – to crate her for longer that she could “hold it.”

If you’re a normal person whose boss frowns on dogs at work, you simply can’t crate your pup all day while you’re gone. He’ll be forced to eliminate in his crate, breaking down his inhibitions against soiling his own den – the very inhibitions you rely on to be able to accomplish house-training.

A general rule of thumb is that puppies can “hold it” during the day for up to one hour longer than they are months old. In other words, your eight-week-old baby dog can be crated for perhaps up to three hours during the day. They can usually go somewhat longer at night because metabolism slows, but it’s a rare two-month-old who can go through the night without a potty break.

So, you can only crate your pup during an 8- to 10-hour workday if you can arrange for at least two bathroom breaks. One quick run home at lunch won’t be enough, at least not until he’s five to six months old. In addition to performing necessary bodily functions, a growing pup needs to move around in order to develop properly. Some



If you plan to crate your puppy during a standard workday, you will need to arrange for at least two bathroom breaks. One break won't be enough until he is about five or six months old.

runaround time during the day helps him develop mentally and physically, practicing skills and learning lessons he can't make up later in life.

Finally, a pup who spends his entire day in a crate stores up mental and physical energy. When an owner comes home exhausted after working all day, she's rarely in a state of mind to cope with pent-up puppy frenzies, or to provide adequate exercise and mental stimulation to make up for a day of relative deprivation. The relationship suffers, and the pup gets relegated to the backyard, alone, or worse – put back into the crate.

While adult dogs are more physically capable of “holding it” for extended periods than puppies, it's still not appropriate for a dog to be routinely crated for 10 hours. Hence, the concerns of adoption agencies.

THE SOLUTION FOR OVERCRATING

Alternatives to crating include finding alternative confinement options, arranging for multiple bathroom breaks, or finding a daycare situation of some kind.

Some owners simply leave their dogs – including puppies – outside in a fenced yard during the day. This allows the dog total freedom to poop and pee at will. It also leaves him vulnerable to threats from the environment – theft, poisoning, accidental escape, snakes, raccoons, skunks, coyotes. I even met a pup once with a huge scar across his back – souvenir of a brief flight, fortunately aborted, in the talons of a Golden Eagle.

Outdoor confinement also leaves the dog free to practice inappropriate behaviors such as digging, escaping, and barking, and exposes him to the extremes of weather.

It might be safer to confine your pup indoors, either in a small puppy-proofed room such as a bathroom, or in a secure exercise pen. This requires newspapering the floor, and perhaps encouraging the dog to use one of the commercial pee pad products or a litter box, essentially giving him permission to eliminate in the house.

This solution has risks as well. Your pup can learn

to rip up vinyl flooring and chew on cabinets if he's loose in a bathroom. He may be able to knock over his exercise pen if it's not well secured, climb out (some come with lids), or get a leg caught between the bars. If you plan to use an ex-pen, get him used to it while you're home, to be sure none of these things are likely to happen.

Multiple bathroom breaks may be easier than you think. If there are two adults in the household, perhaps you can stagger your lunches – one at 11am, one at 1pm – to give him two breaks. If not, a commercial pet sitter can take a daily turn at potty breaks. Other options include friends, neighbors, or family members who live close enough to provide the service until the pup is older. You might even find a local teenage dog lover who would cherish the opportunity to earn some spending money.

Finally, Spot may just need to go somewhere else during the day. Commercial doggie daycare centers are increasingly popular and available

SOILING IN THE CRATE

If Spot eliminates in his crate even when not overcrated, your first course of action is to rule out medical problems. Loose stools, a urinary tract infection, or other incontinence problems make it impossible for a dog to hold it for normal periods of time. Assuming all is well, there are several other possible causes of crate soiling: These include:

- ◆ Your dog has been routinely overcrated in the past, and was forced to soil his crate. His inhibitions against soiling his den have been damaged. He now thinks the crate is an acceptable bathroom.
- ◆ Your dog isn't eliminating outdoors before being crated.
- ◆ Your dog has separation anxiety (SA) and is voiding his bladder and bowels during his SA panic attack.

SOLUTIONS FOR CRATE-SOILING

Your approach to Spot's crate-soiling behavior depends on the cause. If he has learned to soil his

crate, it may help to change his bedding, or remove bedding altogether until he's retrained. Bedding that absorbs fluids, such as a blanket, can make it more comfortable for your dog to be in his soiled crate. His current bedding also may have become his preferred substrate. Try newspaper instead, a square of heavy duty compressed foam rubber (the kind used for flooring), or no bedding. A tether may be a reasonable alternative to nighttime crating.

Make sure his crate is the correct size – big enough for him to stand up, turn around, and lie down comfortably. If it's too large he can potty in one end and sleep in the other.

Perhaps you're just not making sure Spot eliminates outside before you crate him. In your morning rush to get to work on time, you let him out in the backyard and assume he empties before he comes back in. That may be an incorrect assumption. If it's cold or rainy, he may have huddled on the back porch, waiting to be let back in. Perhaps he was distracted digging for moles under a bush, or barking at the kids walking past the yard on their way to school. Maybe he gets a cookie for coming back into the house, so he's skipping the step where he's supposed to go pee on the grass first. It could be a substrate preference problem – he wants to pee on grass, and all he can find is snow!

Set your alarm to awaken you 15 minutes earlier than normal, so you can go out with Spot on leash before and after he eats his breakfast to make sure he's empty when you crate him. If he's reluctant to out in inclement weather, create a sheltered potty spot, so he doesn't have to eliminate with rain or snow dumping on his head, or strong winds buffeting him. Would you be able to "do your business" under those conditions?

If he's determined to go on grass, it's the dead of winter and there's no grass available, you may need to scrape snow away from the grass in his sheltered potty spot or provide indoor-grown grass until you can teach him a new substrate preference. Maybe Astroturf would work!

REFUSING TO GO INTO THE CRATE

Dogs who refuse to enter their crates may have

never been crate trained, or the crating process was somehow abused. Spot may have been overcrated and now resists entering a den he fears he'll be forced to soil. Perhaps someone previously used his crate as punishment, or forcibly crated him. He may have had a bad experience in a crate that may have been improperly secured and rolled with him in it, or by having loud noises or other fear-inducing stimuli occur while he was crated.

LEARNING TO LOVE THE CRATE

Whatever the reason, you'll need to embark on a program of counter-conditioning and desensitization to change Spot's association from bad to good, and retrain his crating behavior

Start by scattering yummy stuff around the outside of his crate, placing a couple of tidbits just inside the door so he can stick his head in to get them. Gradually toss more yummys inside the crate to entice him further in. When he's going in easily, start handfeeding tidbits while he's inside, to encourage him to stay in. If you use a clicker, you



The crate you buy needs to be large enough so your dog can stand, turn around, and sleep in his favorite position. If your puppy outgrows a crate, you'll need to buy a new one for his adult size.

can now begin to click! and give him a treat for going into the crate.

When he'll go in and stay calmly inside the crate while you feed treats, close the door gently, feed treats through the door, and then let him out. Gradually increase the length of time you keep the door closed, until he's quite comfortable with this step. Then take a step away from the crate, click! and return to give him his treat. Continue this process until he is happy to enter and stay in his crate

You can play another game to motivate your dog to "kennel." Take something scrumptious, like a meaty knucklebone, and put it in the crate. Show it to your dog, then close the door with him outside the crate. Let him spend some time trying to get into the closed crate to get at the bone, then open the door allowing him to zoom in (and back out, if he wants) to claim his prize.

To keep crating fun for your dog, be sure to practice crating games often, not just when he's going to

be crated for extended periods. You can also give him food-stuffed Kongs and other interactive toys to keep him happy in his crate.

BARKING IN CRATE

Sometimes barking happens because the dog really needs to go. While it's critically important to heed your dog's bathroom calls, it's equally important not to succumb to crate barking when it's simply his insistent plea to get out and play, or cuddle. The more often you let him out on demand, the more the behavior is reinforced, and the harder it will be to ever successfully train him to stay quietly in his crate.

If you're just starting your dog's crating lessons, be sure he empties his bowels and bladder before you begin, so you know he doesn't have to go. Ignore his barking, and let him out of the crate when he's quiet. At first, he may be quiet for just a few seconds. Mark the quiet with a "Yes!" or a click! so he knows it's the quiet behavior that gets him out of the crate. Gradually increase the length of quiet time before you let him out

If your dog has already learned to demand-bark to gain freedom you'll follow the same procedure as above. However it will take longer to extinguish the behavior because it's been previously reinforced. Your dog is likely to go through an extinction burst – more and/or louder barking, as he tries to make this formerly successful behavior work again. Be strong; if you give in during an extinction burst you will reinforce your dog for an even more intense behavior, and it will be even harder to make it stop. At first, listen for and reinforce even very brief pauses in barking. You have to show your dog what behavior will work – quiet – if you want him to offer more of it.

SOLUTION TO PANIC: DON'T CRATE!

This is very different from demand barking. Some dogs, particularly many of those with separation anxiety (SA), can't tolerate the close confinement of a crate. They experience a full-blown panic attack, and frantically try to escape from their prison.

A panicked dog's efforts to escape from his mental and emotional anguish may include hysterical,



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Some dogs become ferocious in their crates, so management is your best approach to this behavior, followed by behavior modification.

non-stop barking and howling – for hours and hours without pause; frantic attempts to bite and claw his way out – often breaking teeth and ripping out nails in the process; and stress-induced urination and defecation – which he proceeds to paint all over the walls of his crate as he thrashes around.

You cannot subject a panicked dog to these conditions. You must address the SA problem through behavior modification, and may someday be able to use a crate with your dog, if you are successful in modifying the SA. In the meantime, look for doggie daycare-type management solutions

AGGRESSION IN CRATE

Some dogs become ferocious in their crates, usually manifesting territorial aggression, fear aggression, or resource guarding. The behavior is alarming, especially to an unsuspecting passer-by – human, canine, feline, or other – who inadvertently walks too close to the crate and is greeted with a fierce roar and crash when the dog lunges into the side of his kennel. Management is your best approach to this behavior, followed by behavior modification.

Dogs who are aggressive in their crates shouldn't be subjected to environments in which the behavior is constantly triggered. These dogs should not, for example, be left crated and unattended at canine sporting events. If children are in the household, they must not be allowed to approach Spot in his crate. Some dogs will crate calmly if the crate is covered to reduce the stimuli that triggers their aggression. Others do well as long as there's nothing of high-value to be guarded in the crate, such as a favorite toy or stuffed Kong.

If Spot is fearful, taking refuge in his crate out of fear, be sure to do nothing to intimidate him while he's crated. No reaching in, for example, to remove bowls, toys, or dog from crate. You may do better to refrain from crating a fearful dog until he's become more confident with you, to avoid setting him up for crate aggression.

To modify crate aggression, return to your old friends, counter-conditioning and desensitization.

If your dog is aggressive to passers-by, arm yourself with a large supply of high-value treats (canned chicken, rinsed and drained, works well), and sit next to the crate. When your dog alerts to a member of the trigger species (whether it is dog or human) passing at a noticeable but low-arousal distance, begin feeding him treats, non-stop, until that someone is gone. Each time the trigger appears, wait for your dog to notice, then start feeding him tiny tidbits of chicken, non-stop, until the trigger is gone.

Keep watching your dog's reaction. You're looking for his response to the appearance of the trigger to change from wary or alert to "Yay! Where's my chicken!" When you get the latter reaction consistently, move the trigger closer and repeat the lessons, until the trigger can pass next to the crate. If your approach triggers an aggression response, do lots of practice sessions where you walk up to the crate and drop chicken into it, so your dog learns to associate your approach with good stuff. Never punish your dog for being aggressive in his crate – you're likely to make the behavior worse.

CRATING CHOICES

Some dogs crate best in wire crates, others seem to prefer the plastic airline-style kennels. Portable, collapsible soft crates have become hugely popular. Some owners only crate through the puppy stage, others use crates throughout their dogs' entire lives. Both are acceptable. 🐾



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More Perspective on Crate Training

Dr. Ian Dunbar helps dog owners understand even more about this valuable training tool.

Crates are perhaps second only to choke collars as the most misused training equipment forced upon dogs. However, unlike choke collars, there is a terrific training principle behind the use of crates. A crate, or, in other words, short-term close confinement, can be used to help dogs teach themselves two very important skills. The first is eliminating only when and where it is appropriate. The second skill is keeping out of trouble – behaving appropriately in the house. Without these two skills, a dog doesn't have much of a chance in this world.

WHAT CRATES ARE NOT FOR

Before I discuss how crates can be extremely beneficial for training, we should first emphasize how they should never be used. They are not for punishing your dog for doing something wrong; if used in this way, the dog will quickly learn to avoid ever going in the crate, or how to be as obnoxious as possible in order to get let out.

They are not for “warehousing” a number of dogs, so you don't have too many underfoot. I have to say that breeders abuse the use of crates more than all other dog owners. You often see breeders who don't actually want to live with the dogs they breed and raise; they use crates to contain their “merchandise,” keep it out of the way until it's ready to sell. This is in itself objectionable, even more so when they force this prison concept of the crate upon the people who buy their dogs and puppies. I can't tell you how many people I've spoken to who faithfully lock their perfectly

well-behaved dogs in crates for hours every day because the breeder they bought the dog from told them they had to.

PUPPIES ARE BABIES

Crates are also not for keeping puppies out of trouble all day. Puppies are just like babies; they need to be watched every minute, and few puppy owners seem to understand this. People make arrangements for their new babies to be supervised when they are at work or school or going to the movies and so on; they have to learn to do the same with puppies.

Recently, I was talking about this to a dog trainer friend from Manhattan. She was discussing this with a number of students in a dog training class, and several people were having trouble accepting it. Finally, frustrated, she told them, “Look, I'm sorry, I must end the class now, because my two-year-old daughter is at home on her own and I've



Dr. Ian Dunbar feels that there is a terrific training principle behind the use of dog crates.

been away for several hours, so I should get back and see how she is.” Everyone went, “WHAT?” And she said, “See? Actually, I don’t have a child, but you accept that you can’t leave one kind of baby alone; why is it any less dangerous or cruel to abandon another one?”

When the puppy gets older, say, six to 12 months old, you can begin leaving it for longer periods of time. However, you can’t just go out the door and hope for the best. You have to teach your puppy how to cope with short-term close confinement, and later, with long-term confinement. Simply stated, crates are not for long-term close confinement of puppies or adult dogs. They are too small; any animal suffers when it is forced to stay that closely confined for more than a few hours.

LONG-TERM CONFINEMENT

Until your new dog is house-trained, you can’t give it the run of the house all day while you are at work – it would certainly get into trouble – but you can’t put it in the crate, either.

In my opinion, you can view each mistake a dog makes while you’re gone all day as 20 mistakes, because one puddle, or one little chew, sets the precedent for many other mistakes. And when the dog’s bladder and teeth get bigger, and bigger mistakes are made, the dog will be put outside, where it will then learn to dig and bark, and then the neighbors will complain, and then it goes into the garage as a temporary stop, before it goes to the humane society to play the Lotto of life, where only one out of eight dogs win.

So, instead, when you’re away from home, you use long-term confinement to keep him or her out of trouble. The most suitable place for teaching long-term confinement would be a bathroom, one with all the toilet paper, towels, shower curtains, and carpets removed. You’d leave only a few things in there: the dog’s bed (which could be a cozy blanket placed in a crate with the door open), an adequate supply of water, some safe hollow chew toys which are stuffed with food treats, and the dog’s toilet. For the latter, I suggest something like two short rolls of turf on a sheet of plastic. The benefit of this, rather than those



Obviously, parents make arrangements for their babies to be supervised whenever they are away from home; the same needs to be done with puppies.

commercial puppy pads, is the dog will train itself to urinate on turf or dirt.

If your new dog is extremely anxious, and it takes desperate measures to escape, such as tearing the bathroom door apart, you can’t use this method. You will need to consult a professional for advice on dealing with about extreme separation anxiety. The long-term confinement method is a temporary measure, only meant to keep your new dog out of trouble until you have the time to potty- and house-train it.

CRATES FOR "POTTY" TRAINING

All right. Back to what crates are for! The first proper use of a crate, as I said, is for teaching a puppy or dog to eliminate only when and where it is appropriate.

You can teach this to an adult dog within three days. This is something we did with the San Francisco SPCA in the mid-1980s, when I started the animal behavior program there. We taught the volunteers how to take home dogs that weren’t house-trained and house-train them using the umbilical cord method, where the dog is tied to your waist, so you can watch it every second. Then, every hour on the hour you

take it outside, to the place where you want it to eliminate. When they do, you give them three liver treats, take them back inside, and let them off the leash for a little while. If they do not eliminate, they do not get a treat, and they go back inside still on the leash. By four days of this, there were no longer any mistakes; the dog thoroughly wants to use its dog toilet.

Puppies may or may not take a little longer to potty-train. Your consistency will make all the difference. When at home, confine the puppy all the time that you can not watch it 110 percent. Few dogs or puppies will soil their bedrooms unless they are really desperate; don't keep the puppy (or a dog, for that matter) in there long enough to get desperate.

Every hour on the hour, release the puppy, saying, "Let's go potty!" and run with it to its doggie toilet. (Running is helpful because you don't want an accident to happen on the way to the toilet, and because running "jiggles" its bladder and bowels.) Most puppies will urinate within two minutes. If it does, give it three liver treats, and go back in the house. By doing this, you actually give

the puppy the desire to wait until you come home and take it outside to eliminate, because that's the only time it can cash in its urine and feces for liver treats.

Once it has eliminated, then you can take it back into the house and turn it loose, where your empty puppy can spend some time exploring the house under supervision. Then you've only got to watch that it doesn't chew the wrong things! After an hour or so, put it back into the crate, and start the process over again. However, if it doesn't eliminate, it goes back in the crate for another hour, and you start over again.

HOUSE-TRAINING

"Potty-training" is what most people are worried about, of course, but what I call "house-training" is just as important, and, fortunately, it's a nice side-effect of crate training. In just a matter of days, the dog will learn that every time he is confined, he gets to chew on toys, and soon, he'll become addicted to chewing toys. That means he won't destroy the rest of your house, and it means he won't become a recreational barker. He'll still alert when the doorbell rings, but recreational chewers almost never become one of those annoying chronic barkers

The dog will also self-train itself to settle down and to enjoy time spent when at home alone. After a week or two of this procedure, the adult dog can safely enjoy the full run of his home for the rest of his life. Again, I do not advise that puppies are left alone – for any length of time – until they are at least 12 months old

CRATE TRAINING MISTAKES

The most common mistake I see people making with their crates is using it as a prison, or shoving the dog into the crate when he's been "bad." That's the very best way to teach him to avoid going into the crate at any time.

Instead, a dog should regard the crate as his play room, his doggie den. Confining a dog or puppy to a crate should be on par with confining your child to a room with a TV and VCR, a Sega, and a ton of toys. This is a simple thing to teach puppies. When a puppy is tired and hungry, you put him



Dr. Dunbar strongly advises not to leave puppies alone for any length of time until they are at least 12 months old.

in the crate along with his dinner and some toys, and you leave him there. He'll eat his dinner and fall asleep.

If someone has taught an adult dog to have apprehensions about the crate, though, it will probably take at least a few days to overcome them. The process here will be a little different; he'll need additional time to get over his anxiety that he will be locked and trapped in the crate. While you are trying to convince him of this, don't lock and trap him in the crate!

TRAINING THEORY

The most common mistake I see people making with their crates is using it as a prison, or shoving the dog into the crate when he's been "bad." That's the very best way to teach him to avoid going into the crate at any time.

The point of "training" is to make the dog want to do what you want it to do. If your dog doesn't want to be in the crate – if he has only unpleasant associations with it – use your head. How can you make a dog want to be in the crate? Food is one way

First, I would always feed this dog in his crate, and make the most of his daily ration by feeding it to him in numerous courses – as many as a dozen, even. I'd put a little food in the crate, let him go in and eat it, and then let him out right after he's finished. I'd also make the final course of the day a big one, mixing his kibble with some juicy canned food. Put the bowl in the crate and then shut the door, with the dog on the outside, and let the dog think about this for a while. After a minute, he'll be saying, "Hey! Open the crate door! Let me in!" This is what training is all about. When your dog is pleading to get in its crate, let it in!

Here's another tactic. Throw a bit of kibble in the crate. Let him go in and get it; he'll come right out again. Do this three or four times. Then, throw a bit of kibble in, and when he goes in to get it, shut the door and immediately feed him another couple of bits of kibble through the bars. Then, let him out, and ignore him for three minutes. Then, put a bit of kibble in the crate, shut the door, feed



"If your dog is expressing dissatisfaction with his lot, you haven't really done your job as a trainer to teach him to want to do what you want him to do," says veterinary behaviorist Ian Dunbar.

him five bits of kibble through the bars, and then let him out and ignore him for five minutes.

The next time, put a bunch of kibble in a Kong toy, along with some freeze-dried liver and a bit of honey in the Kong, so it is difficult to get the food out, and put the Kong in the crate. Let the dog in and shut the door. Before he's finished trying to get all the food out, after about 10 minutes, open the door, let him out, take the Kong away, and ignore him for five minutes.

What is the dog learning? "When I'm in the crate, my owner talks to me all the time, she sits next to me and reads me a book, and keeps feeding me. And there are toys in the crate. There are no toys anywhere else – that crate is OK!"

If a dog is expressing dissatisfaction with his lot, you haven't really done your job as a trainer to teach him to want to do what you want him to do. Every dog develops favorite places to lie down. If you've crate-trained your dog properly, that favorite place will be in the crate with the door open. If the dog goes there of his own accord, it's a good sign that you have done a good job as a trainer. 🐾

Best Types of Crates for Training

Wire crates, soft crates, plastic crates — even dog crates that resemble furniture! With all this variety, it's important to know what type of crate is best for training.

The *Whole Dog Journal* focuses a lot on the usefulness of having a comfortable crate which your dog calls home. Crates are a convenient way to keep your dog out of harm's way, out of your way, and away from guests when necessary. A crate is regarded as the safest way to transport dogs in the car, and if you ever fly with your dog, you're going to need a crate for that too.

There is one significant benefit to crate training a new dog or puppy which becomes the only reason



The folding wire dog crate is the most commonly used by dog guardians.

for many dog guardians: Crates are instrumental in house training or potty training dogs.

Crate training your dog comes with ample benefits for the both of you, so let's review the several varieties of dog crates on the market, and what each crate is best suited for

THE TYPES OF DOG CRATES

Plastic dog crates are generally used for small to medium-sized dogs. They are typically made entirely of thick plastic, have a front-facing swinging door and a carrying handle on the top. This type of crate is helpful for dogs who are on the go with their owners. Portable and sturdy, these crates are good for car and plane travel. If you're flying with your dog and you know he'll need to go in the cargo hold, a strong-walled crate like this will offer the most protection. Some dogs prefer the covered, den-like feeling that this type of crate offers.

The folding wire dog crate is the ubiquitous dog kennel. When you choose one that folds, you can easily move them around the house or into the car. The advantage of these crates include that they come in all sizes, your dog has unrestricted view of the house from within, and they are easily cleaned. Putting a cushion or thick blanket down on the metal bottom tray makes it comfortable for your dog. A common issue with these crates, however, is often they are too big for the dogs that use them. A roomy crate might just be big enough for your dog to eliminate on one end and curl up for bed on the other, foiling your housetraining initiatives. You can purchase a divider to limit the amount of space your small dog or puppy has, however.

The soft-sided dog crate isn't an appropriate kennel for every dog or puppy. They are usually made of canvas or nylon, and are therefore more destructible than wire or plastic crates. Dogs who like to scratch or chew at their confines are not good candidates for a soft crate; in general, WDJ doesn't recommend soft crates for initial crate training. For already crate-trained or exceptionally calm dogs, a soft kennel is a comfortable, lightweight travel option for dogs of any size.

If you have a giant breed dog or puppy, you may choose a "heavy" duty dog crate. These are

commonly marketed for giant breed dogs, dogs who destroy their crates, or for master kennel escape artists.

If this is the only kind of crate you've found that is large enough for your enormous dog, that's great. But if you think a heavy-duty crate is the right solution for a dog with crate anxiety – a dog who relentlessly chews the crate and tries to escape, who can't hunker down and relax in confinement no matter what – you need to take a few steps back and seek some help from a professional with experience in dealing with separation anxiety.

Remember: the point of a crate is not to be a prison, but a haven for your dog. If you need maximum security just to keep your dog inside a crate, your dog is not reaping the training benefits a crate is supposed to provide. Instead, some negative behaviors like house soiling may even worsen as the dog's stress compounds.

An interesting alternative to the basic models is the dog crate that is designed to look like, or blend in with, furniture (these are sometimes called "fashion crates").

This kind of crate is exactly what it sounds like: a dog kennel that doubles as home furniture. The most typical example of this crate is in the form of an end table or credenza. WDJ does not recommend these crates for dog training. They are not portable or easily cleanable, and they can be quite expensive. Yes, they look nice in the living room, but unless your dog is accustomed to sleeping in cabinets, we don't recognize this type of dog kennel as an effective training tool.

DO DOGS ACTUALLY LIKE CRATES?

The age-old theory is that dogs, having evolved to be "den" animals who seek the security of small, enclosed spaces to sleep and hide, will avoid pooping or peeing inside the crate because that would defy an instinct to keep their den clean. Dogs find comfort in having a crate of their own – when they have a positive association with the crate, it becomes a place to retreat when the house environment gets overwhelming, or when they want to sleep unbothered by housemates. Naturally, dogs are motivated not to eliminate in their own



The plastic dog crate is great for smaller dogs who are often on the go with their owners.

space. For this reason, you can avoid accidents in the house overnight by crate training your dog.

Dog crates are NOT supposed to be used as punishment! Dragging the dog into his crate whenever he misbehaves will not only encourage your dog to consider the crate as a prison and explore ways to escape it, but will also ruin your dog's chances of using the crate in its intended way: as a place to relax.

It's true: Some dogs hate the crate. There are alternatives you can try if your dog dislikes being crated. You can also probably rebuild a more positive association with the crate through careful, calculated conditioning. Even for grown dogs who've had a long-time aversion to the crate can be reconditioned to tolerate it.

In summary, the best kind of crate to use to train your dog depends on your lifestyle and intentions. Do you need a dog crate that pops up and breaks down easily for relocation, or something sturdy for frequent car rides? Invest in a properly sized wire crate. Need a carrier for your small dog that he can feel extra safe in? The hard-sided plastic crates are your best bet. 🐾

Safe Chew Toys for Your Crated Dog

Be sure to choose these with care because they can pose a danger.

Dog owners tend to think of crates as safe havens for their dogs or puppies – a place where they can stash a puppy for a short time to keep him from chewing an electrical cord, bothering an older grumpy dog into an aggressive event, running out the door as kids are coming in and out, and so on. Even owners of adult dogs sometimes use crates to keep their dogs safe – safe from a escaping when tradespeople are working on the house, or safe from getting into a fight over food or treats with another dog in the house, as just a couple of examples.

The overall idea is that the crate is a place where the dog or pup will be safe while we need to take our attention elsewhere and are unable to supervise them for a short amount of time.

However, owners are often advised to give their puppies or dogs a toy, bone, or chewie to make being in the crate more enjoyable and to help pass the time. And if the item that is given to the dog or puppy is dangerous to his health, then that time being unsupervised in the crate is absolutely not safe. It may, in fact, present a bigger danger to him than being loose in the house without the item.

You can give your crated dog or puppy anything you would give him when he's uncrated, as long as you are supervising him actively and closely – listening for sounds of overzealous chewing or choking, and watching to make sure that the item isn't getting chewed to a small-enough size that he's going to be tempted to swallow it. But if you will be walking away from your crated dog or pup,



Choose your puppy or dog's chew toys carefully, and be sure to supervise so they don't become a choking hazard or bowel obstruction. Chew toys for crates need to be chosen with even more care.

even just to take a shower or a Zoom meeting, your choices for a crate-safe chewie or food-dispensing toy are far more limited.

CHEWS SIZE LARGE

If the item you give your dog is meant to be chewed (as opposed to a product that holds food for the dog to lick or knock out) it should be too large for the dog to swallow, even after a good long session of chewing. Don't give ANY dog something that can be completely chewed up to a swallowable size in less than an hour.

The problem with this advice is finding items that are large enough. I have been dismayed, again and again, to see chew items designated for "large" dogs that are smaller than anything I would give to a five-pound Chihuahua; when this is the case, the designated "small dog" sized version of the same product is nearly guaranteed to be perfectly sized to choke a small dog.

Many of the chewie products on the market can be chewed up and swallowed by an aggressive chewer in 10 minutes or less. If your dog can chew the item to a swallowable size in less than an hour of dedicated chewing, it's not safe to be given to him in a crate (which most of us are using as a short-term substitute for close supervision).

Lots of people buy dried beef "pizzles" for their dogs, and they are often sold in 12-inch lengths. But have you noticed that most dogs can chew these down to three or four inches within 15 minutes or so? At that point, these (and similar chew items) are in danger of being swallowed and causing the dog to choke! While a few dogs will keep chewing until the item is small enough to be safely swallowed, others will gulp it down when it's definitely still too long for it to be safely swallowed. For this reason, we wouldn't recommend an item like this be used in a crate!

There is a single rawhide product on the market that I buy for my dogs (who are both strong-chewing large dogs [about 70 pounds each] and for any puppies or adolescent dogs I happen to be fostering: Wholesome Hide's 10-inch Retriever Roll. These are made of a single sheet of very thick rawhide that has been rolled up. These rolls do not contain small pieces that can readily be freed from the roll and consumed. It takes a lot of work to chew off small pieces of the rawhide to consume, which is good, because we don't want any dog to consume very much rawhide in any one sitting. If Wholesome Hide made even larger rolls, I would buy those, instead.

The company does make smaller rolls, in the same thick, single-sheet rawhide. But if I want to buy a rawhide product for my sister's 15-20 pound dogs, or my friend's 5-pound Chihuahua-mix, I buy the exact same product in the exact same large size that I buy for my big dogs. Why? If it takes days of on-and-off-again chewing for my large dog to chew up and consume the rawhide roll, the same product will take these small dogs weeks to do so – and that's great! Providing something that is ridiculously large, far too large for any sized dog to consume, will slow them down and require them to really work at.



OBSESSED WITH CHEWING

If your dog is a particularly aggressive chewer, don't even try to give him something to chew when he's unsupervised. Medium and large dogs who are very strong chewers might not be safe when left alone with any item they can get between their teeth.

Food-filled toys will be safer to use with these dogs, but only if they demonstrate, through multiple trials, that they are content to lick and chew the toy just enough to get the food, and they don't advance to chewing the toy itself after the food has been consumed.

WHY BONES AREN'T A GREAT IDEA

We don't approve of giving dogs dried bones – neither the sterilized, bleached white ones that are devoid of tissues or marrow, nor the decidedly not sterile dried ones that have tissue still attached to them and marrow still present inside them. The former bones are too hard; dogs invariably try to crack them open, and are at a high risk of cracking their molars on them. While the latter bones are softer, they contain enough moisture to preserve bacterial reproduction. This means they are either highly likely to be loaded with pathogenic bacteria (such as Salmonella) or they have been treated with radiation to kill said bacteria – and we're not fans of irradiated items.

If you are going to give your dog a bone to keep him happy, it should be fresh (or fresh-frozen). Ideally, these still have tissue still attached to them; the act of chewing, licking, and tearing at these tissues is incredibly helpful for scraping plaque from a dog's teeth. Unfortunately, it's difficult to find bones that have tissue still attached to them, unless you are lucky enough to have access to an old-fashioned butcher who still

cuts up carcasses. Industrial “big meat” practices utilize most bones for other purposes, and the few that do make it into supermarkets (and even commercial suppliers of raw diets who sell raw bones) usually lack these tissues.

Bones should be given only to dogs who have proven, thorough many supervised trials, that they can chew them safely (not super aggressively, and not intent on swallowing as much bone as they can as quickly as they can). And even then, we’d only give a large, fresh, meaty bone to an experienced bone-eating dog in a crate if the crating period was not going to be more than an hour or so; bone-chewing should be more closely supervised than can be accomplished in a longer stay in a crate.

PIG EARS, SNOUTS, HOOVES, AND OTHER PARTS

Nope. We wouldn’t give a dog any of these items in a crate when we are not close by and actively supervising. Too many of these items can be chewed to sizes that can be choked on in a short time.

FOOD-DISPENSING TOYS

Stuffing food into a toy such as the original Kong is the safest option for most dogs who benefit from having something in their crate to keep them occupied and happy.

Some people stuff their dogs’ Kongs with canned food, a raw diet, or rehydrated freeze-dried food and then freeze the toy, so it takes longer for the food to melt and for the dog to completely empty the toy. Others use kibble mixed with peanut butter, cream cheese, or yogurt – anything healthy and sticky enough to give the dog a little challenge while he licks and chews the toy to try to eat all the food.

However, you still have to make sure that the toy is of an appropriate size (too big to be swallowed) and toughness (chew-resistant), and that your dog will empty the food from the toy in a safe manner, not progressing to chewing the toy after the food is gone. Run a number of trials while supervising the dog to determine what type of food keeps your dog interested in working to empty the toy – and keeps him at the task the longest.



@Tapepa79/Getty Images

An appropriately-sized food-filled Kong toy is the safest item for most dogs in crates.

One of the newest food-dispensing product types to proliferate on the market are rubbery mats that adhere to a flat surface (like a wall or floor) and have grooves or other indentations that can be smeared with cream cheese or peanut butter, requiring the dog to lick them for a long time in order to consume all the food. We love them! But probably not for crated dogs. Few crates have a surface that would hold them, for starters. And again, an unsupervised dog just might advance to chewing up and swallowing pieces of the mat after licking the food off of it.

There are many types of “food puzzles” (which require the dog to manipulate sliding covers or remove pegs to reach food treats) and balls or cubes that will dispense kibble when knocked around by the dog. These are not generally safe for most dogs to use without supervision, and certainly not appropriate for use in the close confines of a crate.

KING KONG

We’ve said it before and we’ll say it again: An appropriately sized food-filled Kong toy is the safest item you can give your unsupervised, crated dog. But it’s not 100% safe; perhaps nothing is! We’ve heard of dogs who are able to chew up even the toughest Kongs – the black ones, intended for the most aggressive chewers. If you have one of those dogs, crating him with a scattered handful of kibble might be the only safe solution. It won’t last as long as some of these other options, but it will be less risky than all of them. 🐾