

CRATE TRAINING

Teaching your puppy to be comfortable in a crate (and puppy-proof pen) is a useful thing to do. Crate training should NOT be just locking a puppy in a cage. There are two types of crate use – open crate and crate confinement.

Open Crate/Safe Haven

The majority of the time, the crate should be accessible and open so the puppy can go in and out whenever he likes (within your puppy-proof area if he is unsupervised). This is a place that puppies will learn is a safe haven, where they can sleep undisturbed by toddlers, the place they can retreat to if they need some quiet time, or if they are overwhelmed by visitors. An open crate is a place they can settle down and chew a toy without worrying whether someone will take it. The open crate has the following rules:

- The puppy is not to be disturbed while inside the crate. You can make it fun and toss treats and food in for him. But the crate is your puppy's safe place. If he is sleeping in there, do not reach in towards him, even to pat him.
- Children, visitors and other household pets must be taught that the crate is out-of-bounds, even when the puppy is not in it. It is the puppy's very own place.
- If the puppy is inside, you should not reach in and drag him out. Instead, call him and reinforce him for coming.
- The crate must be big enough for your puppy to stand up, turn around and lie flat out on his side comfortably.

Crate confinement

Crate confinement should be limited to very particular situations, with the aim being to teach your dog to be comfortable for when confinement is required in emergency situations, during travel, veterinary visits, or at dog sporting events. Crate confinement is not appropriate to use to cage your dog while you are out; an open crate within a puppy-proof area is recommended until housetraining is complete, when your dog should be able to safely free roam in your home.

You may decide to keep your puppy confined in a crate next to your bed while you sleep, although once he is housetrained you can transition to an open crate.

Teaching a puppy to be comfortable in a crate

To teach crate confinement, initially leave the door of the crate open and allow the puppy to wander in and out at will. Give your puppy treats and food dispensing toys inside the crate. Don't force your puppy in as this is likely to scare him.

Then put treats in and close the door with your puppy on the outside. As soon as your puppy shows he'd like to go in, then open the door so he can get the treats. Leave the door open.

Once your dog is comfortable going inside the crate, sprinkle some treats around on the floor of the crate, or give the puppy a long-lasting chew, snuffle-mat or licki-mat.

While he is eating, say 'Door closed', and close the door. You want him to notice that you are closing the door, not just be sneakily trapping him. Open it again ('Door open') if he comes towards the door, or before he finishes with the treats. He needs to trust that you are not trapping him inside. Practice this stage over a few days.

When your puppy seems relaxed with the door closing in the crate, have some quiet time with him! Watch TV, read a book, browse the internet, whatever quiet and relaxing activity you enjoy. Make sure all your puppy's needs have been met (exercise, toileting, mental stimulation). Close the door of the crate with puppy and a chew inside and sit directly next to the crate. Whenever your puppy is looking relaxed, put in a treat just in front of his nose. This is not a 'mark and reinforce' situation; we don't want a dog in training mode. We want to 'capture the calm'. Use lower value treats, long-lasting chews or stuffed kongs, to reduce excitement. If you find that even kibble is too exciting (the pup keeps leaping up when you give it), then try whispering 'Good Puppy'.

Once the puppy is happy to settle with the crate door closed, repeat the exercise, but slightly increase the distance between you and the crate, so the puppy is comfortable even when you are not right beside him.

If your puppy whines, barks at you or scratches the door to get out, that's a sign that you've let the confinement training session go for too long. Ask the puppy to sit (if he knows this cue) and feed a series of treats. When he is quiet, and has focused on sitting or lie down, then open the door. However, if your puppy is genuinely distressed (anxious, panicked, or frantic) then do not leave him in the crate, or ask for a sit first. He will build up associations of bad things happening in the crate. Let him out straight away and go back to step one. If you are finding that this process is too stressful for your puppy, he may have separation anxiety. Contact your friendly positive reinforcement trainer or vet now – this is not something a puppy will 'grow out of'.

You can gradually increase the time which the pup spends in the crate with the door shut, at times such as during dinner time, car rides or at dog sports). However, do not exceed 30 minutes without a toilet break. If you use a crate overnight, you can keep it shut for longer, as long as your puppy is beside your bed, so he can wake you up if he needs to go to the toilet.

