

Crate Training/Housebreaking

What is Crate Training?

Crate training is the process of conditioning your dog to accept being in a crate, which will eventually become his own “den.” Crate training is used for a variety of reasons: it is an effective tool for housebreaking, and gives your dog a safe, secure place of his own. Having a dog who is comfortable being crated is also useful for confinement for short periods when necessary, for safe transportation via car or plane, and for keeping a dog calm and confined when recovering from surgery.

Why Does it Work?

Dogs have a natural instinct not to soil where they sleep, and this is what makes crate training such an effective housebreaking tool.

What Type and Size of Crate will I Need?

There are two main types of crates. The better choice is the hard plastic kind that consists of a top and bottom that snap together, has ventilated slats on the sides, and a metal grille door. A new, quality crate can cost anywhere from \$35-125. While that might sound like a lot, the investment is well worth it in the long run. A damaged carpet alone would cost you more than that to replace! There are also crates made of heavy gauge wire that fold down into a suitcase shape. These are not approved for airline use, but some people prefer them for heavy-coated breeds because they offer better ventilation. If you must use a wire crate, place a dog bed or other barrier in such a position that your dog cannot stick a paw through the bottom horizontal openings; otherwise your dog's paws may get stuck or be injured.

The crate should be just big enough for your dog to stand up and turn around in. If your dog is a puppy, do not buy a huge crate for him to grow into. Having all that room will defeat the purpose. You may need to buy a puppy-sized crate now and a larger one later. Or, purchase a crate that comes with dividers so you can gradually expand the puppy's space as needed.

Is Crate Training for Adult Dogs, too?

Yes, absolutely! Many people are under the false impression that crate training is just for puppies, and that older dogs will not “take” to a crate. Untrue! Older dogs often learn faster than puppies, and most will appreciate the comfort and security a crate offers.

How do I Introduce my Dog to the Crate?

Put a blanket or old sweatshirt that has your scent on it in the bottom of the crate. This will not only be comfortable for your dog, but helps the bonding process as well. (Note: There are some dogs who will urinate if soft bedding is present; if this is the case with your dog, remove the bedding altogether.) Keep the crate where you want your dog to sleep, for example, by the side of your bed. When you first introduce the crate, be sure the door is propped open so as to not swing shut by accident. If your dog doesn't go in to explore on his own, toss treats inside, or feed a few meals in there. Try not to force your dog into the crate (this could form an unpleasant association and make things more difficult for both of you). Each time your dog goes into the crate, say, “Go to bed” in a high, pleasant voice. Your dog will eventually come to associate the verbal cue with going into the crate.

The first night, say, “Go to bed” as you gently help your dog in, then softly close the door. You may want to put a toy in with him. It is perfectly normal for a dog to whine, bark, or even throw tantrums the first night in a crate. Do NOT reward the behavior by petting your dog, whispering

soothing words, or worse, by letting him out. Try simply ignoring him for a while. If he doesn't stop after a reasonable amount of time, simply say, "No" in a firm voice, or tap the top of the crate and say, "Quiet." Just don't get into the cycle of your dog whining and you saying, "Quiet" each time, thereby reinforcing the behavior by responding to it at all. There are some dogs who will have trouble holding their bladder all night (usually young pups). You will quickly come to know the difference between a normal whine and a need-to-urinate whine. If the whining becomes frantic during the night, open the crate door, *pick your dog up*, and bring him out to the spot where you want him to eliminate. As he does, praise him in a high, happy voice, then immediately return him to the crate. Most dogs get used to this routine very quickly and soon sleep through the night without interruption.

The Routine

First thing in the morning, open the crate door and *carry* your dog to the preferred elimination spot. (If you let him walk out on his own he might urinate before making it to the door.) As soon as your dog begins to circle and sniff, or otherwise indicates that he is about to potty, use a soft verbal coaxing, "Go potty!" Over time, by repeating your instruction just before he urinates, your dog will eventually become conditioned to urinate upon hearing your verbal cue. (Use the verbal cue each time you take your dog out to potty—just be sure to wait for signs that he is about to go before you say it.) As your dog finishes, offer calm verbal praise. After the morning elimination, either place your dog in a baby-gated area such as the kitchen, or keep him with you, tethered to you with a long line or tethered to a nearby piece of furniture where he'll be within your sight. *Do not let your dog out of your sight*, as accidents happen in a split second; you need to be there to interrupt as they happen. Your dog can also be crated for brief periods during the day if you are unable to keep an eye on him, for example, if you need to take a shower.

If you notice your dog starting to circle and sniff or squat, startle him with a sharp verbal, "Eh-eh!" (or if necessary, by clapping your hands), then quickly bring him to the proper elimination spot. If he goes, don't forget the praise! If you find an accident that has already happened, consider it your own mistake and clean it up quietly. A dog will not associate a correction with what he did wrong if it's after the fact. *Take your dog out to eliminate upon waking and after naps, after meals, after playtime, and before bedtime.* That means standing outside with him so you can praise him when he goes, as opposed to letting him out and assuming he's done his business. Be sure to keep an eye on him right after he's returned indoors as well, as that is when most of us are less vigilant, and is therefore when accidents are most likely to happen.

If you must leave the house, you can leave your dog crated up to three hours at a time. This will prevent housebreaking accidents as well as preventing unwanted chewing or destruction. Potty your pup before placing him in the crate, and place a favorite *safe* toy or bone in the crate with him. As a general rule, do not leave your dog crated longer than three to four hours at a time, except overnight when you are there.

What Then?

Once your dog is housebroken, you can still use the crate for confinement periods if necessary. Many people end up taking the door off the crate entirely, and their dogs still sleep, hang out, and take refuge in their "dens." Crate training is well worth the time and investment, and giving this permanent place of safety and comfort to your dog is really a gift to you both.