

Using crates for dogs can be a controversial subject. Some people view it as cruel to limit a dog's movement this way and other people believe crating is necessary to train a dog properly. The fact is that both opinions can be correct. A crate is a tool and like many tools it can be used incorrectly. When used correctly it can be very valuable, for example, when house training dogs and puppies. Even if you don't plan to use a crate frequently to house your dog, being sure that your dog is comfortable in a crate is important; there may be times when the dog may need to be crated for traveling or for extended recovery from a surgery. Dogs that can't tolerate being crated can find these experiences very traumatic.

Make the Crate Great!

The first step in getting your dog used to a crate is to help the dog see the crate as a great thing. Avoid confining the adult dog in the crate at first, if you do not have to, especially if the dog already demonstrates some fear or anxiety about the crate. Wire the door open or take it off, if necessary to keep it from accidentally closing on the dog and frightening it. Be sure that very comfortable bedding is in the crate and begin by tossing treats into the crate occasionally or leaving toys inside. Feed every meal in the crate. If the dog hesitates to go into the crate to eat, then begin by placing the food a few feet from the crate and at every feeding, move the food bowl a little closer to the crate until the dog is eating the food immediately next to the crate. Then begin moving the bowl into the crate a few inches every day until the dog must step all the way into the crate to eat.

Once the dog will happily eat its meal in the crate, you are ready to move to the next step. At this point in the training, you should also find your dog occasionally going into the crate to nap. Begin closing the door to the crate while the dog is eating but open the door a few seconds before the dog finishes eating. Begin leaving the door closed for a few minutes more each time but always stay within view of the dog. Only when he seems comfortable in the crate with the door closed and you present, should you begin trying to leave the dog alone in the crate for a few minutes at a time.

When you begin leaving the dog alone in a closed crate, start out by leaving it for just a few minutes at a time. Do this while you walk to the mailbox or take the trash out. Very slowly increase the time that the dog is left alone.

Important Do's and Don'ts

DO always leave the dog with a special treat such as a stuffed Kong or other food puzzle when left alone. Small bite sized treats are OK for very short periods, but the longer the dog must stay in the crate, the more long lasting the treat should be.

DO always leave a comfortable bed or bedding in the crate so it is comfortable for the dog. If the adult dog routinely destroys bedding, contact a behaviorist. This behavior can be a sign of separation related distress and should be investigated.

DO try to avoid leaving any adult dog in a crate for more than 4-5 hours at a time.

DON'T ever leave a puppy in a crate for longer than he can comfortably hold his bladder. The rule of thumb is that a puppy can wait the number of hours as his age in months plus one so that a two-month-old puppy should be taken out every three hours.

DON'T ever use the crate as a place to punish the dog. If you need to put the dog away because it is behaving inappropriately (becoming too exuberant or barking at visitors for example) just quietly and calmly take the dog to the crate and toss some treats inside. Don't yell at the dog. You are not punishing the dog; you are simply putting it away where it can be safe and avoid practicing unwanted behavior. If the dog will need to be confined for a while, again be sure to give it a food puzzle or other treat to keep it busy while confined and to continue promoting the crate as a great place to be!

DON'T ever immediately remove the dog from the crate when it is whining or crying to get out. However, you also do not want to keep a dog confined to a crate while it is crying, whining, or barking. Instead, count to three and if the dog doesn't whine for at least 3 seconds, then immediately open the door to the crate. If the dog stops just to take a breath, you can open the door. While you do not want the dog to learn that barking or crying gets it released from the crate, you also do not want to leave a dog in a crate that is becoming distressed. This can lead to serious problems associated with being confined or being left alone.

DON'T ever force a dog into a crate if it does not want to go.

DON'T continue confining a dog to a crate that whines, cries, barks, or tries to break out of a crate. This can potentially lead to serious self-harm by the dog, a strong aversion to the crate and serious anxiety related problems.

If for some reason, you believe you absolutely must confine your dog but cannot safely do so, investigate other options such as:

- A friend, neighbor or family member keeping the dog while you are away.
- "Doggie Day Care" or similar short term boarding options. (Remember, some dogs don't want to interact with other dogs, and that is OK)
- If possible, temporarily take the dog to work with you until you have complete crate training at home.
- Remember, if you cannot confine your dog because confinement distresses him, but you feel that he must be confined for his own safety or to protect your home from damage, please ask to speak with the shelter veterinary behaviorist.