

# Crate Training

Crate training a dog can take time, but it can be useful in a variety of situations. You can use a crate to limit access to the house for a new dog/puppy until he learns all the house rules - like what he can and can't chew on and where he can and can't go to the toilet. A crate is also a safe way of transporting the dog in the car and can be used as a safe space for a dog, especially a timid/shy dog. If you properly train the dog to use the crate, he'll think of it as a safe place and will be happy to spend time there when needed. A dog with separation anxiety should NOT be confined to a crate as it will not resolve the underlying cause.

The dog's crate should be just large enough for him to stand up and turn around in. If you have a growing puppy and have a large crate, you can use a divider. You could stuff an inexpensive large pillow/cushion in the back of the crate while the puppy is still small then remove it when they grow (be prepared for it to potentially get dirty or destroyed!).

## **The Crate Training Process**

Crate training can take days or weeks, depending on the dog's age, temperament and past experiences. The crate should always be associated with something pleasant, and training should take place in a series of small steps - don't go too fast.

### **Step 1: Introduce The Dog to the Crate**

Put the crate in a high-traffic (unless the dog is timid/shy) area of your house with a soft blanket or towel in the crate. Encourage the dog to enter the crate by dropping some treats near the opening, then just inside the door, and finally, all the way inside the crate. If he refuses to go all the way in at first, that's okay - don't force him to enter. Continue tossing treats into the crate until the dog will walk calmly all the way into the crate to get the food. If he isn't interested in treats, try tossing a favorite toy in the crate. During this step you won't be closing the door, leave it open. This step may take a few minutes or as long as several days.

### **Step 2: Feeding The Dog Meals in the Crate**

After introducing the dog to the crate, feed him his regular meals near the crate. This will create a pleasant association with the crate. Each time you feed him, place the bowl a little further back in the crate.

Once the dog is standing comfortably in the crate to eat his meal, you can close the door while he's eating. At first, open the door as soon as he finishes his meal. With each feeding, leave the door closed a few minutes longer, until he's staying in the crate for ten minutes or so after eating. If he begins to whine to be let out, you may have increased the length of time too quickly. If he does whine or cry in the crate, wait until he stops before you let him out. You may have to wait for a brief moment when the dog stops whining, but don't let the dog think that whining "works" to get out of the crate.

### **Step 3: Conditioning The Dog to the Crate for Longer Time Periods**

After the dog is eating his regular meals in the crate with no sign of fear or anxiety, you can confine him there for short time periods while you're home. Give him a command such as

"crate," toss a treat inside for him to get and close the door. Wait for a couple minutes and then let him out. Repeat this process several times a day. With each repetition, gradually increase the length of time he remains in the crate.

Once he's comfortable in the crate while you're in sight, then practice leaving the room for short periods of time before you let him out. Remember not to let him out while he is whining. Once the dog will stay quietly in the crate for about 30 minutes with you out of sight the majority of the time, you can move to the next step.

#### **Step 4: Crating The Dog when left Alone**

After the dog is spending about 30 quiet minutes in the crate, you can begin leaving him crated for short periods when you leave the house. Put him in the crate using your regular command with a treat and a few safe toys. Keep your departure and arrivals quiet and low-key, and vary how long before you leave that you put the dog in his crate. You want the dog to learn that it's no big deal when you leave, and you always come back. Continue to crate the dog for short periods from time to time when you're home so he doesn't associate crating with being left alone. When allowing the dog out of the crate, do not allow him to rush out as soon as you open the door. Ask him to Wait and block his exit until he will sit and make eye contact with you. This will be difficult the first few times, but it will soon become part of the crating routine.

Before leaving the dog in the crate for a long period of time, make sure he is tired by going for a long walk and/or playing fetch with the dog. It is also important to give the dog something to do while in the crate when you're gone. See Canine Enrichment handout for ideas.

### **Things to be aware of**

#### **Too Much Time In the Crate**

A crate isn't a magical solution. If not used correctly, a dog can feel trapped and frustrated. For example, if the dog is crated all day while you're at work and then crated again all night, he's spending too much time in too small of a space. Make other arrangements to accommodate his physical and emotional needs. Also remember that puppies under six months of age shouldn't stay in a crate for more than three or four hours at a time. They can't control their bladders and bowels for longer periods.

#### **The dog isn't yet fully crate trained but you have to go to work, what do you do?**

Try NOT to force the dog into the crate, this will lead to a negative association with the crate and it will get increasingly harder to get the dog into the crate. If the dog cannot yet be trusted alone in your home outside the crate, try to find another solution for confining the dog. Use a small room/space that you can block off the entrance with a baby gate (or two, with one stacked on top of the other). This will give the dog a bit more space and allow the dog to look out but not get out. If possible, place the crate in this same space and make the crate the

“comfy zone” with a blanket and toys inside. Don’t forget to leave something for the dog to do (eg. favorite toys and a food-puzzle toy) to occupy himself while you are gone. And don’t forget to continue to work on crate training when you have some time to devote to the process.

### **You’ve come home to discover the dog has busted out of the crate.**

Don’t get angry and don’t punish the dog. It’s too late and the dog will not understand why you are so mad. Busting out of the crate is a sure sign that the dog is not yet crate trained. Once the dog has successfully gotten out of the crate, he/she will try again the next time, and the next. Try the above idea for confinement and reach out to the Foster Care Officer.

### **Whining**

If the dog whines or cries while in the crate at night, it may be hard to figure out if he needs to go to the toilet or just wants out. If you followed the steps above, the dog hasn't previously been rewarded for whining. Try to ignore the whining. If the dog is testing you, he should stop whining. Don't yell at him or bang on the crate. If the whining continues after you've ignored him for several minutes, use the phrase he associates with going outside to the toilet. If he responds and becomes excited, take him outside. This should be a trip with a purpose, not play time. If you are sure that the dog doesn't need to eliminate then the best response is to ignore him until he stops whining. Don't give in or you'll teach the dog to whine loud and long to get what he wants. If you've progressed gradually through the training steps and haven't done too much too fast, you'll be less likely to encounter this problem. If the problem persists, go back and work through the steps of crate training again.

### **Separation Anxiety**

Attempting to use the crate to fix separation anxiety won't solve the problem. A crate may prevent the dog from being destructive, but he may injure himself in an attempt to escape from the crate. Please contact the Foster Care Officer if the dog is experiencing separation anxiety.

### **Additional Tips to help the dog be happy in the crate**

Every dog is different and sometimes it just takes a bit of trial-and-error to find what the dog likes best. Here are some tips to try.

- Play soft music or talk radio for the dog when you leave.
- Leave the dog with a stuffed Kong or other chew toy
- Leave something with your scent on it in the crate. This can be an old, unwashed t-shirt, pillowcase or towel.
- Try placing the crate near a window so the dog can see out. Or, just the opposite, making the crate more of a cave-like environment.

*This protocol was created by Austin Pets Alive! and modified by Animal Welfare League NSW to reflect our own experiences and advice.*