

How do I crate train my puppy or new dog?

Crate training your young puppy is an excellent idea so long as the crate is used appropriately. Excessive time spent in a crate is not acceptable.

Used correctly it can aid in house training and keeps your young dog in a safer location when you are unable to supervise. Having a fully crate trained dog also helps should your pet face extended crating – such as during a veterinary stay, move or during travel.

To crate train your puppy, make sure you are prepared with an ample supply of food treats. These should be small crumbs. (Freeze dried chicken breast works very well.) For very young puppies, you can crush their kibble with a rolling pin. For the later stages of training, you'll need a Kong toy and spreadable treat (peanut butter, cream cheese, yoghurt cheese) to fill it as well as a safe chew bone.

Be prepared for brilliance!

If your puppy goes into the crate on its own – reward your dog generously.

Have a few treats ready in your pocket at all times just in case.

By working carefully and methodically, your puppy should quickly get adjusted to the crate. Resist the urge to rush through or skip steps. Haste makes waste. If your puppy frightens, you'll spend much more time trying to undo the mistake.

Step 1 – Create a positive first impression

Set up the crate and leave the door open. Show the crate to the puppy and scatter crumbs of treats inside the crate. These should be spread about and not put in a pile. Let a few crumbs fall in front of the door. Let the puppy eat the treats. Let the puppy walk out of the crate whenever it likes. Do not point out missed bits of food that remain in the crate. (If your puppy is sensitive to noise, make sure your puppy is not accidentally startled by the clanging of a metal crate)

Repeat at least 10 times or until the puppy is happily entering the crate.

Step 2 – Show that the door opens and closes

Toss crumbs of treats inside the crate. Scatter them around – do not put them in a pile. When your puppy is inside the crate, gently close the door. As you are closing the door, drop a few more treats into the crate. Immediately open the door. Let the puppy leave when it wants to.

Repeat at least 10 times or until the puppy is happy and relaxed with the door opening and closing.

Step 3 – Show that the door latches

Toss crumbs of treats inside the crate. Scatter them around – do not put them in a pile. When your puppy is inside the crate, gently close the door and latch the door. As you latch the door, toss a few more crumbs into the crate. Immediately unlatch and open the door. Let the puppy leave when it wants to.

Repeat at least 10 times or until the puppy is happy and relaxed with the door being latched.

Step 4 – Teach that you will always come back

Toss some crumbs into the crate and let the puppy go into the crate on its own. Close the door and latch the door. Take one step away from the crate. Make sure you walk normally – don't back away from the crate. Immediately return to the crate and toss in one extra treat. Open the door and let the puppy come out when it's ready to.

Repeat at least 10 times or until the puppy is happy and relaxed with you taking one step away.

Step 5 – Leave for longer periods of time in the same room

Continue with the previous step, but gradually start moving further and further away from the crate. At this point stay in the same room as the dog. You will always be leaving – coming back – giving 1 treat – opening the door.

Repeat until the puppy is happy and relaxed during while you walk anywhere in the room.

Step 6 – Stay away for longer periods of time

Switch to a Kong toy. Fill it with something the dog likes. Put the Kong toy into the crate. Let the puppy go inside on its own. Close the door. Walk around the room as before. Periodically stop by the crate and drop one treat inside the crate. Then leave the puppy and continue doing things around the room. Leave the puppy in the crate for 30 seconds. Gradually as you practice, stay away for longer periods of time – about 10 to 15 minutes. Always let the puppy out while it is relaxed and happy being in the crate. Do not push it to the point where it starts to panic. When you open the door, the puppy can choose to stay in the crate with its Kong. But if it gets out of the crate then calmly take the Kong away. Trade the Kong for a treat so your dog learns to give up the toy without any resistance. If you see any signs of tension, lip curling or growling, then get professional assistance.

Repeat until your dog is happy and relaxed for 10-15 minutes in the crate.

Step 7 – Teach the puppy that you are going to leave the room

As before, give the puppy a stuffed Kong toy. Instead of walking about the room, walk out of the room. Only go one step. Return to the crate and drop in one treat. Keep leaving the room briefly and returning to the dog for 10 – 15 minutes.

Repeat at least 10 times or until the dog is relaxed and happy with the process.

Step 8 – Teach the dog to tolerate being in the crate for longer periods of time

As before, give the puppy a stuffed Kong toy. For longer absences you will also want to give a safe chew bone such as a Nylabone. Begin by leaving 5 seconds. Gradually leave the room for longer and longer periods of time.

Repeat until the dog is relaxed and comfortable with you leaving the room for 15 – 20 minutes.

Step 9 – Teach the dog you may leave the house.

Give the puppy a stuffed Kong and a safe bone. Put on shoes and other outdoor wear. Pick up your keys and purse. Step outside the house and lock the door. Unlock the door and return to the dog. Open the crate door and let the dog come out when it is ready.

Repeat until your puppy is comfortable with the sounds of you leaving the house.

Step 10 – Gradually leave for real absences.

As your puppy gets the hang of things, gradually start leaving for short errands. Build up toward real life absences. If leaving for several hours, make sure your puppy has had enough exercise. Tired puppies tend to sleep when left alone in the crate. You can also put on some soft music to help the dog relax in your absence. Finally make sure they get adequate bathroom breaks.

Final notes:

- Periodically give your puppy some positive alone time when you are home. Otherwise your dog might learn that “you always leave when I go in the crate.” Some puppies start disliking the crate when they learn this. Choose a time when the dog would naturally nap.
- Crate training problems are often difficult to distinguish from separation anxiety. If your puppy displays unusual amounts of anxiety, then contact a professional.
- All puppies will whine at some point during the process. When this happens stay quiet and wait for the puppy to calm down. Do not tell the puppy to “shush” or say, “quiet”. Let the puppy out when it has been quiet for at least 5 – 10 seconds. Both positive and negative attention can fuel further whining. Go back 1 – 2 steps in the instructions and revisit easier steps.