

Crate Training

By Coral Atnikov

The crate is an invaluable training tool. It will keep both your pup and your possessions safe while your dog is learning what is expected of him. Dogs are den animals so the environment that a crate creates is a comforting and cozy one.

Crates are extremely beneficial while teaching your pup his house training skills. Dogs are very clean animals and won't soil where they sleep, so keeping his crate space small will help in house training.

Your dog's crate should be large enough for him to stand, turn around, and lie down in. Although your pup will grow into his crate, right now it is much too large for him. Make it more puppy friendly by decreasing some of the size. You can add a box in the back, and cover everything with a blanket. Make sure there are no gaps in the sides; you don't want your pup to get stuck.

Your dog's crate should be a warm safe spot that he has access to all the time. The crate should be kept close to the family activity, at least until he is comfortable being left alone with the door closed. If you can teach your pup that the crate is a great place to be, you will never have problems of him not wanting to go in.

If you introduce your pup to the crate right away, chances are good that he will be happy to go in and use it. If he does go into it happily, tell him he is a good boy and give him a treat. Make it as comfortable as possible with blankets and a toy or two. When he shows complete comfort in the crate close the door, if he is still relaxed praise and/or treat and open the door. Increase the amount of time the door is closed, until you can close the door for twenty to thirty minutes at a time. This may go very quickly.

Next, you are going to want to teach him to be alone while he is in the crate. Once you can keep the door closed, you can start adding distance from the pup/dog. Close the door, and leave the room-just for a second- come back into the room and praise and treat if pup/dog is still calm and content. If he becomes upset, wait until he is once again calm before you praise, treat, and open the door. It is very important that you don't let him out of the crate when he is making a fuss. *

Increase the time that he can be in the crate while you are not in the room. If you have progressed slowly, and only moved to the next stage when your pup is ready, you should have eliminated any fears or concerns your pup had of being left alone in the crate. *

IF your pup or dog does not accept the crate right away, you may have to train him to accept being in it. If he already has a negative association with being inside the crate, you will have to teach him that the crate is a GREAT place to be and not scary at all. You need to flip his association from a negative one to a positive one. You are going to use the clicker to re-teach him that the crate is great. Read or review the process in "Introduction to Clicker Training" before you begin.

To start with, leave the crate door open, anytime your dog interacts with the crate you are going to click and toss a treat (toss slightly away from the crate). Interaction means looking in the general direction of the crate, moving in the general direction of the crate, accidentally walking past or into the crate. At first, he will have no idea why you are clicking and treating, that's o.k. - eventually he will learn that it is connected to the crate.

If you have been clicking repeatedly for looking at the crate, you are going to raise the criterion for the click. Just looking at the crate will no longer earn a click. Your dog must do more, or have greater interaction with the crate to get the click and treat. He may take a step towards the crate, click for that. Keep clicking for a step until he takes that step then turns to look for his treat. If he is looking for the treat he has made the connection that a step towards the crate= a treat.

Once again, you will raise the criterion, he needs to take two or more steps toward the crate to earn the click and treat. Then three steps, then moving his face or head closer to the crate, to putting one paw into the crate, sticking his head into the crate, two paws in, three paws in, his whole body in, etc.

Once he is walking into the crate, you can start naming the behavior. After he goes in the crate, but before you click say 'crate' then click and toss the treat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Now ask him to go into his crate - if he goes in, click, and have a party! He has learned that when you say 'crate' he is to go into the crate.

Now you are going to want him to stay in the crate for longer periods before you click. So when he goes into the crate wait a second or two before you click. Slowly increase the amount of time before you click.

When he is happy being in the crate for a few minutes, close the door-don't latch it, just close it, click, open the door, and treat. Repeat that a few times, if he is calm with the door closing, try latching it-click, opening, and treating. Slowly increase the amount of time he can be calm with the door closed. Once you get to this point, you should be able to progress quickly. When he can be in the crate for long periods, 20-30 minutes, you are going to teach him to be alone in the crate (paragraphs with *).

Your dog or pup should now be crate trained. He will go to his crate on request and be comfortable with the door closed and left alone for longer periods. Congratulations!