

Crate Training Puppies

Every puppy needs to learn the skill of resting calmly in a crate. This skill will be needed at the veterinary hospital, for traveling, and for restricted activity due to illness. It's also a lifesaver for many young dogs during the destructive chewing stage that starts at several months of age and can last until age 2 to 3 years in some breeds.

After a dog has become trained and reliable in the house, the crate will often be needed only for specific reasons rather than everyday use. One critical situation that can call for bringing out the crate again is separation anxiety. The ability to relax in a crate can save a dog's life during this crisis.

Usually it works best to crate the puppy in your bedroom when you're sleeping. If you want the dog to share your bed, wait until the adult temperament emerges. Then if it turns out the temperament is not suited to bed privileges, you will not have the difficult job of teaching the dog to stay off the bed. Teaching a puppy to stay off the bed from the beginning is much easier, both for you and for the pup.

People tend to make the mistake of giving the puppy attention for making noise in the crate. When you do this, you confirm the puppy's instinct that being alone is death (it would be, in the wild), and that calling for help will bring someone. Having the crate in your bedroom for sleeping tends to help because the puppy can hear, smell and possibly see you. Not being alone, the puppy usually finds it easier to get used to the crate. Your sleeping helps set the scene for the puppy to sleep, too.

Keep the puppy on a good schedule of food, water and outings so the puppy's body will have the best chance of making it through the night without a bathroom break. If the pup does need a break, make it very low-key with dim lights and soft voices and no playtime. If you completely avoid going to the puppy when the puppy is making noise, problems usually pass quickly. But make no mistake, lost sleep comes with the puppy-adoption territory! Don't miss the chance to start your puppy off right, or you will lose a lot more sleep over a longer period of time, because crate-training will take much longer.

The worst thing to do is let the puppy yell for a long time, and then go to the puppy. Doing that teaches the puppy to persistently make noise in the crate. It communicates to the pup that you want to be notified with lots and lots of noise! It also causes the puppy enormous stress that can become a lifelong response to being confined in a crate. Adult dogs in this stressed state can break out of crates and badly injure themselves. This is not the future you want for your puppy.

What you want the puppy to discover is that nothing bad happens from being alone in a crate. You also want the puppy to learn that it's okay to let you know of a need, but you will not come in response to loud racket. Check on the puppy after the puppy has become quiet again.

If your puppy isn't making it through the night without a potty break, schedule it so that the puppy doesn't have to wake you up and ask. Realize, too, that the puppy's body will awaken and need to potty whenever someone in the household gets up. That person or someone else will need to give the pup a potty break.

Don't trick a puppy about the crate. Give a treat when the pup goes in, but don't be sneaky about shutting the door. Don't put the puppy into the crate when the puppy is sound asleep, to wake up trapped in a crate. That can cause the puppy to distrust both you and the crate.

Be careful not to abuse the crate. When you are at home and awake, supervise the puppy in person rather than using the crate. Puppies need exercise, mental stimulation and guidance from you in order to grow up healthy and happy. Too much crate time is not humane. Puppies sleep 14 hours a day or so. If the crate time is scheduled so the pup can use it for sleeping, that's ideal.

Make the crate a pleasant place to rest. A few safe chew toys and a treat can help the puppy relax and drift off to dreamland. Everyone in the household can sleep better with a crate-trained puppy.

Crate-Training for Adult Dogs

Crate-training is easiest in puppyhood, but at times it's both necessary and feasible to train an adult dog to rest calmly in a crate. It's important to note, though, that not all dogs can be crate trained. Some will panic and can hurt themselves.

It's possible to create the panic problem by how crate-training is attempted. If the puppy or dog gets the idea that making a fuss will cause you to come to the rescue, you can accidentally create a dog who becomes hysterical when confined to a crate, a dangerous situation for the dog.

But most dogs can be crate-trained, especially when it's not a crisis and you can take your time. Plus, with a mature dog who is not a chewer, you can put bedding in the crate and make it a cozy place to sleep. That's often unwise with chewing pups or young dogs who will chew and possibly swallow bedding.

Evaluate your mature, non-chewing dog as to whether you'll best use cool bedding or warm bedding. Blankets can be too hot under furry dogs. Cold-natured dogs, on the other hand, need warmer bedding. So customize that aspect for your dog's body. Ideally, you want your dog friend to like the bedding enough to go in there for a nap with the door open.

Then, with the crate door open, start giving your dog treats in the crate, feeding some meals in there, and generally making it positive and pleasant. Never overdo the length of time a dog is in a crate. While you might be able to regain the dog's trust with a slow process of building up from short times again, some dogs will never forget.

The length of time to continue work on positive conditioning to the crate with the door open will vary according to your dog's history and how your dog feels about the crate. Take it slowly.

As the dog gets completely happy about the crate with the door open, start closing the door briefly with the same pleasant things going on. Build the time gradually, staying in the room. Next, start leaving the room for short periods. Then gradually lengthen the periods of time you are gone.

Eventually you'll be up to the time periods you need. Eight hours is the top limit for crating at any one time. A dog who can sleep 8 hours in a crate cannot necessarily go 8 hours at other times. During sleep, the dog's body quiets bowels and bladder. When the dog wakes up, the body has to compensate for having held this waste.

If your dog can't handle the crate for some reason, often a small area of the house works equally well. Another option is to use baby-gates to keep the dog out of certain sensitive areas of the house. You may need to do this while conditioning the dog to the crate, since you would ruin the conditioning by suddenly leaving the dog in the crate for longer than the time you've conditioned.

Other options for managing your dog until the training is complete would be doggy day care or day boarding with your veterinarian. You might also be able to find a friend, relative, neighbor or professional to dog-sit while you're out.

Managing a dog is an interesting and creative activity! Dogs change, our circumstances change, and we often have to rethink what "always worked before" but now doesn't. Communicate with your veterinarian to stay aware of any issues that affect your dog's ability to cope with crating or with the current schedule. Various medications, medical conditions, and body changes with age can mean a dog simply can't handle what worked fine when the dog was younger.

Dogs differ, too, in their temperaments, ability to hold bowels and bladder, past experiences, and many other factors that affect crating. What one dog takes in stride can be just too much for another dog.

The ability to rest calmly in a crate has saved dogs' lives during crisis times. If you have to cope with a situation such as evacuating in an emergency or keeping your dog on restricted activity for several weeks after an orthopedic surgery, crate-training can make a huge difference in how the dog will do. Be sure to allow plenty of time for your dog to learn to feel safe, secure, and comfortable in a crate.