



## Crate Training

The great question of dog training is: “To Crate or Not To Crate.”

The answer to this question will be answered with another question: “How will you crate your dog?” Unfortunately, most of the old school methods of crate-training are downright cruel and basically useless in the goal we wish to attain: A dog that is happy being in his crate. Therefore, we must understand that we don’t make the crate a *bad place*; we don’t force our dogs into their crate, and we don’t use the crate as a place of punishment.

So, getting off on the right foot, we want to teach our dogs to understand that the crate is a safe – rewarding place to be. Some dogs will immediately take to being in a crate; others will fight you tooth and nail, while others are downright confused or scared by the crate or the concept of confinement. In this article I’ll cover the intricacies that will give you the tools to get any dog to enjoy their crate. Remember, the crate is good place; we don’t jam our dogs into a crate when they are being bad. It may take some time to get them to understand the crate, but this time and the effort you put forth will pay off in the end.

When I first introduced the crate to my puppy, he didn’t like it much. I started him off in my home confining him in the kitchen by the use of a baby gate. In order to introduce him to the crate I devised a simple system; I used a 2-door crate - that’s a crate that has a door on one end and one on the side. So, when I brought him out of the kitchen, he had to walk through the crate to get out. In other words, I put the crate door up to the gate in the kitchen and opened the kitchen gate. He then walked “through” the crate, going in one door and coming out the side door and then getting to me, or going outside. There was always a treat in the crate, yet never one when he came out. Remember, we want the crate to *signify the reward* – not coming out of the crate.

Every time my puppy would cross his familiar threshold, he walked through the crate. I also moved the crate around the room, this made going through the crate a necessity and he didn’t grow to associate the crate with a particular area. This de-sensitized him to the

idea of the crate. It only took a few times, but once he was neutral, we were able to begin *crate training*. If you encounter a trainer who tells you to force your dog into the crate, find another trainer. I encourage you to avoid this heavy-handed technique, as it will only build a negative imprint to an object you want your dog to see as a place of safety and reward.

Once your dog is indifferent to the crate, remember, I'm saying *indifferent*, that means he's not *freaked out by the idea of it*, we can work on teaching him that being "inside" is a good thing. In order to accomplish this, I use a very high-level food reward. For those who don't believe in using food as a reward for training, I urge you to reconsider. Unless you work for free, don't expect your dog to work for free. During training, the use of food to mold and shape behaviors is the single best way to teach your dog in a fair manner. If someone tells you that dogs trained with food will eventually never work without a food reward, consider that we are rewarding a dog for learning, and a properly taught dog will want to please you because you taught him in a fair manner. I don't want to get into a discussion of the advantages of training a dog with food in this article, please believe me it is the best way to train for this scenario – as well as most others.

The first step in getting your dog to understand the concept of the crate is getting him to understand that being inside of the crate is a good thing and an action that brings him reward. In essence this concept is counter intuitive. Remember, we are always rewarding our dog for being near us, now we are asking him to *go away* from us. In order to do this we teach the dog that going *to* the crate is a good thing. I begin this by rewarding any action by the dog that involves getting into the crate. Be sure that the door of the crate is propped open, we do not want to introduce closing the door of the crate just yet. If you have an issue, take the door completely off. You will not want the dog to become startled by a closing door at this point. Also, if possible, I suggest using a wire crate, not the plastic travel type. The wire crate will give him the feeling of freedom since he can still see out. The plastic crates are ok if he has no confinement issues, but they are not preferable in the beginning.

To get him into the crate sit near the crate and hold your hand as far inside of the crate as you can (holding a treat) and wait for him to go into the crate. Once he reaches your hand, give him the treat and then pull your hand out. If he pops right out of the crate, that's ok, do nothing. Don't say anything, and whatever you do, do NOT give him a treat outside of the crate. The treat you are using to get him into the crate should be worth its weight in gold. Teaching this new behavior has to get him the reward of a lifetime. He ONLY gets it when he goes into the crate. The idea of rewarding him as far inside the crate as possible teaches him that the reward is for being *inside of* the crate, this will make more sense as the lesson goes on.

*\*\* If your dog shows a strong aversion to the crate, begin by rewarding him for sniffing the crate, touching the crate, putting one foot into the crate, etc. Any action on his behalf that shows his trust toward the crate should bring him a reward. Be patient and you will see that his aversion will slowly diminish.*

Once your dog starts to understand that he gets rewarded for being inside the crate we can start adding a word to this action. The word I use is *CRATE*. Simple, huh? Don't introduce this command / word to *try and teach him to get into the crate*. Until we teach him what the word means, it has no true meaning to him. So telling him **CRATE-CRATE-CRATE** and expecting him to understand what we want is senseless and unfair to him. We teach him the word when he *does* the action, not before. Once he ties this action to the word we give him the reward to cement the idea in his head.

So, now that we have the dog going into the crate, we can tag the word CRATE to the action. The crate door still has not been shut, the lesson thus far is simply the *dog going into the crate and getting a treat for doing so*. When he comes out, we don't fuss over him. This is the biggest mistake people make. If he's rewarded for coming *out* of the crate, we will confuse him. Don't lose sight of this. This means no praising, petting or anything when he comes out. Don't feel compelled to praise him or fuss over him when he's outside of the crate. *Just be neutral. Remember, you're teaching him to go into the crate. There is no need to reward him for exiting the crate.*

Now, let's walk over to the crate, place our hand holding the treat inside the crate and say CRATE. When he enters the crate and all four feet are inside of the crate, we reward him with a verbal YES and the treat. If you haven't read my article *The Binary Dog* please do so. When we pull our hand out of the crate, more than likely the dog will follow our hand out. We ignore him, reload a treat into our hand, place the hand back into the crate and say CRATE. He will follow the hand in and we repeat the reward process. Once this action is clear to the dog we will try to use only the verbal cue, CRATE and see if he enters the crate. Begin by doing this while you are standing near the crate door. Later you will be able to do this from across the room. If he does jump into the crate, use an excited tone and deliver the reward into the back of the crate. Remember; do NOT reward him at the door of the crate, *always* at the back. We want to be crystal clear that the reward is for being completely *inside* of the crate, not at the door.

The next step is to build duration for the dog remaining inside of the crate with the door open. This is simply done by withholding the reward for a moment or two. Since we are using a verbal reward; YES, we can wait a moment before we deliver the food reward. At some point you'll see a miracle and that will be your dog running into his crate looking for a reward. Once he starts doing this we can begin closing the door. As he runs into the crate, give him his reward and close the gate. No need to leave the door closed for long, it's just teaching him right now what's going to come next.

You may notice as you begin building duration that the dog will pop into the crate and look for the reward. When that reward is not delivered right away, he will pop back out. When this happens, wait. Eventually he will begin offering behaviors to gain the reward: he may sit, lie down, beg or anything else he knows. Don't give in until he offers the one behavior your looking for which is him *going into the crate and waiting*. When he does this, reach into the crate and reward him. Eventually you will be able to build more and more duration onto this exercise.

Some dogs have no reaction to the door closing, others panic. In either case, we don't make a big deal out of it. If the dog throws a panic fit when we close the door, wait. Do NOT open the door to let him out. If you do you will ruin everything you've worked to accomplish thus far. If he starts barking and carrying on, ignore him, but don't walk away. Simply stand there and ignore him. When he calms down, open the door and let him out. Say NOTHING, be completely indifferent to him. Saying things like "It's ok" or anything else is proving reward outside of the crate. Remember, he only gets the reward for being *inside* the crate.

If he had a bad reaction to the door closing, he may avoid the crate for a little while, so give him some time – it's no big deal. Once he ventures back into the crate, reach in and give him a reward and DON'T close the door this time. The door closing doesn't have to be a part of the lesson each and every time. We are teaching him to like his crate. If he doesn't think the door will close every time, he may feel a bit safer. You can touch the door, move the door, anything. You are desensitizing your dog to something that makes him feel uncomfortable. Take your time and be patient with your dog.

Each time your dog comes out of the crate, act indifferent during the training phase. Do not reward, pet, love, kiss, or anything. Be indifferent.

Once he understands that we *will* close the door and that he will not be rewarded for carrying on, but instead for being quiet, we are nearing the completion of the lesson. No matter how much the dog carries on inside of the crate, the door is never opened unless he is calm. Closing the door in the beginning should only be done for a few moments to teach him that his compliance gains his freedom. He will learn to associate this place / the crate, with a place that he goes to, a place where he is safe and a place that he can go in and out of. It is *his* crate and the sooner he feels safe, the sooner he will learn to trust the crate and us for putting him in there.

This next step ties into the previous one quite simply. We will teach our dog that he cannot just lunge out of the crate when we open the door. This is very simple to teach and very important as well. Once the dog has built some duration inside the crate, we walk up to the crate (with him inside) and wait. As the dog approaches the door we place our hand onto the door / latch. We wait for the dog to sit. We may have to wait and wait – but wait we will. This may take time and he may get a little edgy, but when he sits we reward him with a GOOD BOY. We then slowly begin to open the door – SLOWLY. If he nudges his head out of the door, close it quickly. Yes, you will slam it on his nose, but don't worry. He must learn to wait before coming out. Don't be lax in this part of the training. If your dog learns to bolt when the door is opened, he will see being outside of the crate as a the good thing and we are avoiding that, besides, structure – and enforcing that structure– is what we are teaching our dogs. When you close the door on his nose, he will be quite surprised. It's not our goal to hurt our dog by doing this, but merely surprise him. You will see a look of confusion on his face, but he will slowly try to figure out what he needs to do to get out. That is simply to sit, or lay down. Do not feel compelled to tell him what you want unless you are 100% certain he knows. That means if you keep telling him SIT and he doesn't, you're spinning your wheels and his.

Remember, you won't be able to enforce your command if he doesn't do it. Also, don't yell at him or try to verbally instruct him if he tries to force his way out. You may say NOPE, but don't make a bigger deal out of it than it really is. Remember, the closing of the door will teach him much more clearly than your voice. He wants to get out, and there will be one action that will give him that opportunity. Believe me, he will figure it out and when he does, he won't forget it. Being consistent here will pay off in spades.

I like to build the habit of my dog sitting or laying down when he sees me approaching his crate. I don't want a dog that runs out of the crate and then jumps all over me and tears around the house. I want a dog that comes out of the crate casually and then acts civilized. To do this, build structure around the way your dog sees coming out of the crate.

I will emphasize this again here because it is so important: *DO NOT MAKE A BIG DEAL WHEN YOUR DOG COMES OUT OF THE CRATE*. Anything like, "Oh what a good boy!!!" or "YAYYYYYY," is a verbal cue for excitement / reward and this teaches the dog that he's FREE. If the crate is the good thing, keep it as such. I can tell my dog to go to his crate from anywhere in my house or even to go to his crate in the car and he does so willfully and more importantly, *happily*. At night before we turn-in he goes outside to potty, then runs into the house and into his crate and waits for his bedtime cookie. He does this without me asking because I have built such a value around the crate and his being inside of it. Furthermore, when I leave the house, he stays in the crate. I can tell him at anytime to go to his crate, and he will. I always reward him for his action and he is happy and content in his *place of safety*. When your dog crosses the threshold of the crate nothing happens. Later, once he is OUT of the crate we can play and have fun and carry on. The bells of freedom ringing as he exits the crate signify that he *was* in prison!

As with all things that are worthwhile, crate training takes time. Some dogs will get it in a day; others may take a bit longer. Do not give up on your dog, because he will never give up on you. Do not force your dog into a crate, because if you build that type of association with the crate, he will not like being in there. Patience and reward will win out. If your dog has issues, you can start by feeding him near his crate, then move the bowl slowly into the crate. Ignore him if he doesn't eat. Take the food away if he acts stubborn and try again at the next feeding time. Try throwing some of his favorite treats into the back of the crate to start. Anything that you can do to build a positive association to the crate is good. The more you focus on making the crate a place where good things happen, the more likely you are to have a dog that enjoys being in his crate.

A dog that is crate trained doesn't have to live in a crate, in fact my dog only goes in the crate when necessary: such as when I leave. However, knowing that he doesn't have an aversion to this will help you immensely if you need to put him into a crate for an emergency or even if you are traveling. A crate-trained dog is a dog that is easy to take with you anywhere you go; it is also another great training tool in his arsenal. The more things we can teach our dogs the better off they are. Crate training can be used for potty training, barrier training, and introduction of other pets, people and things. I urge you

never to take advantage of the barrier of the crate such as allowing another animal or person to tease or torment your dog through the crate.

Dog training, above all, must be fair to your dog. Your dog depends on you for his life and his safety, please take this responsibility seriously.

*Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.*

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:

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