

Creating a Pleasant, Restful Hideaway for Your Dog

No matter your pup's size or age, providing him with his own cozy, private space can benefit you both. This type can help with housetraining, car or plane travel, and overnight stays with family and friends.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Thankfully, more and more dog guardians are recognizing the benefits of crate training; when the introduction is handled correctly, the crate serves as a safe, pleasant, restful place your dog visits throughout the day
- The first step toward a lifetime of positive crating is finding the right type and size crate for your furry family member
- Once that's accomplished, it's time to transform the new crate into one of your dog's favorite places to spend time
- The final step is introducing crating to your dog through progressive positive reinforcement
- Most dogs who've had a bad experience with being crated in the past can be patiently and successfully reintroduced to their new doggy den in a positive way

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Fortunately for our dogs and for us, the use of crates has become much more popular in recent years. Fewer and fewer pet owners view crates as "jail cells" or a form of punishment.

I'm personally a big fan of positive crate training. No matter your canine family member's age, providing him with his own cozy, private space is beneficial for both of you. A crate can help not only with **housetraining**, but also car or plane travel, and overnight stays with friends, family, or at a pet-friendly hotel.

A health benefit of crate training is that dogs accustomed to spending time alone in their little "dens" are much less likely to develop separation anxiety or other phobias. Putting a puppy in his crate for a nap or some quiet time also helps him learn not to expect constant human attention, similar to the use of playpens for babies.

Crate training coupled with positive reinforcement behavior training will set the stage for a secure, balanced adult dog who is delightful to be around, which is always the goal. To set the stage for a lifetime of positive crating, your dog's space should be safe, comfortable, and relaxing, and he/she should associate it with only positive experiences.

Crate Size Is Important

When you purchase a crate for your dog, the size is important. You want a space that's not too big or too small. Your dog should be able to stand up, lie down, and turn around comfortably in it, but it shouldn't be so large that she can easily use one end as her bathroom and the other end for sleeping and snacking. If you need to housetrain your dog, a too-large crate can actually slow down the process.

If you're unsure what size crate to buy, talk to a shelter volunteer, your veterinarian, or your breeder about what you want to accomplish so they can help you pick the right size. If you're crate training a puppy, especially a giant breed, you'll probably want a smaller crate initially and then a bigger one as she grows.

When you get the new crate home, place it in an area where your family spends a lot of time — not in an isolated spot, or outdoors, or a high traffic location (which can be stressful), or where your dog will experience temperature extremes.

Make sure there's nothing hanging inside the crate that could cause your dog harm, and especially while she's still young and rambunctious, take her collar off before she goes into the crate so it can't get hung up on anything. As necessary, disinfect the crate with either mild soap or vinegar and baking soda and rinse it thoroughly.

From Crate to Snug Doggy Den

Your canine companion will need something comfy to lie on in his crate, so **bedding** is a must. Depending on your dog (some destroy their beds, others don't), you can choose a plush bed, a crate mat, or something in between. (If your dog is a persistent bed shredder, it's a sign he may need more frequent or vigorous exercise and/or mental stimulation.)

You'll also want to keep a fresh supply of clean filtered water in the crate. To keep the mess to a minimum, you can use a stainless-steel bowl that attaches to a side or the front of the crate. If you'll be confining him to his crate for short periods, it's a great idea to have food-stuffed or treat-release toys on hand to keep him occupied while he's home alone.

Keeping the environment inside your dog's crate comfortable is also very important. Depending on where you live, where in your home the crate is located, and your dog's tendency to overheat, you might want to consider a crate fan (attached to the outside of the crate), or a small floor fan placed near the crate. The fan should provide good ventilation and keep your dog cool, without blowing directly on him — or he should be able to move away from it if he feels the need.

It's also important not to place the crate in direct sunlight, too close to a heat source, or in a cold, drafty area of your home.

Something else you might want to consider is covering the crate at night or to provide your dog with quiet time when he needs it. I drape a blanket over the back half of my dogs' crates to create a quiet, dark, den-like atmosphere. My dogs use their crates as bedrooms — they go into them to sleep. If you decide to cover the entire crate, keep in mind it will cause the temperature inside to heat up, so you should make adjustments as necessary.

Convincing Your Dog to Use Her Crate

If you purchased a crate ahead of time and it's there when your dog comes home, if she hasn't had a bad past experience with confinement, it should be pretty easy to get her acclimated to her little den.

The first rule of crate training is to never, ever force your dog into or out of a crate, because you can end up with an unmanageable case of separation anxiety or a pathological aversion to enclosed or small spaces. The crate must represent a safe zone for your dog, so you never want to make her safe zone feel unsafe.

The second rule of crate training is what I call, "It's all good," which means everything about the crate is positive from your dog's perspective. While you're getting her used to her crate, everything she loves goes in there, and the door stays propped or tied open so she can freely investigate.

Put treats in and around the crate, along with treat release toys, chew toys, food puzzle toys — all her favorites. I also recommend feeding her in the crate with the door open. The goal is to have your dog voluntarily go into her crate because everything about it is positive and fun.

If Your Dog Has Had a Bad Crating Experience in the Past

If your dog is nervous or fearful due to a past bad crating experience, you'll need to take things slower. A dog who has been crated as a form of punishment or locked in a crate for inappropriately long periods of time will need to be gently and patiently reintroduced to the crate.

Make sure to leave the door open (tie it open if necessary so there's no chance it will close while he's in there). Put food rewards around the outside of the crate and inside as well so he can get comfortable going in and out without worrying about being trapped inside.

Once you sense he's comfortable inside the crate, feed him in there with the door open. Once he's comfortably eating in the crate, close the door. Don't go far and keep an eye on him. At some point he'll realize the door is closed and he's inside. Try to ignore any whimpering or barking. Once he's calm, open the door and praise him.

When you graduate to closing the crate door, leave it closed for very short periods of time (no more than a minute) so that he realizes he's not trapped or being punished. In the meantime, continue putting treats into the crate several times a day to reinforce the association between it and good things.

Once your dog begins associating good things with the crate and he's feeling more comfortable in there, you can close the door for longer periods. Be sure to leave something fun inside such as a treat-release toy he can focus on. Don't leave your house until your dog is completely comfortable in the closed crate while you're at home. You can gradually extend the amount of time you leave him in the crate, providing he's getting consistent, frequent trips outside to potty.

Once he's comfortable being in a closed crate when you're at home, you can begin taking short trips away from the house. If you need to leave your dog for longer than 4 hours, consider using a dog sitter or a doggy daycare facility rather than crating him for long periods of time.

If you're struggling with crate training, I recommend talking with a **positive dog trainer** who can help you work through the problems you're experiencing.

Sources and References

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