

Dog Crate Advice

From wicker to wire, your guide to selecting and using a dog crate.

Jane Musgrave

Ideally, you should introduce your dog to a crate when he's a puppy, which is the best time to establish household rules. Instead of yelling at your puppy hours after he has chewed up a favorite pair of shoes or gnawed through the cushions of the couch, you can put him in his crate so he doesn't get into trouble in the first place. Dog trainers agree that scolding your dog hours after he has done something wrong accomplishes nothing. Your dog can't equate your hysterical rant with something he did hours — or even minutes — before.

A crate can also help housetrain your puppy. It doesn't necessarily take the work out of housetraining. It just makes it easier to monitor when he has to go outside — and easier to clean up if you don't get to him quickly enough. Put your puppy in the crate, then take him outside after meals and naps, and perhaps when he whimpers, scratches, or paces. Praise him mightily when he goes outside. Soon, he'll catch on.

But buy a crate that fits your puppy. If it's too big, he might use part of it as a bathroom.

You may have more difficulty luring your older dog, unaccustomed to confinement, into a crate. Nonetheless, the same rules for acclimating your dog apply.

Choose the Correct Size

Get a crate big enough to allow your dog to stand up and lie down comfortably. Put the crate in an inviting place, where he can still enjoy the household's activity.

Initially, keep your dog, particularly a puppy, in the crate for short amounts of time (five to 10 minutes) while you're home. Sit near the crate until you're sure your dog is comfortable. Then, go to another part of the house for about 15 minutes before returning to check on him, letting him know you haven't abandoned him. Once he can stay in the crate for 30 minutes without anxiety, you can begin leaving the house for short amounts of time — 30 minutes to an hour — or begin putting him in the crate at night while you sleep.

As your dog becomes acclimated to the crate, lengthen his stay. But never leave your adult dog in his crate for longer than eight hours or your puppy for three or four. Puppies can't control their bladders for much longer than that.

"After the initial training, your dog need not spend time in his crate when your family is home and can keep an eye on him," Skoletsky says. He uses crates for his own dogs in just two cases: "When I can't supervise them or when I'm leaving." Other dog trainers and owners find crating useful for occasional time-outs to help anxious or overexcited dogs calm down.

Once a non-believer, DiPaolo now says he's sold on crates. "I've lost couches, dozens of pairs of shoes, and important books. He even ate my wife's homework once," he says, remembering Nemo's early days. "If I ever got another puppy, I'd definitely use a crate just to get through that teething stage."

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