

Dog Crate Advice

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

Jane Musgrave

Like many dog owners, Jim DiPaolo had strong opinions about crates. "I thought it was mean to keep a dog cooped up," he says. "I didn't believe in crates."

Then, his 6-year-old Labrador Retriever, Nemo, had hip replacement surgery, and DiPaolo had no choice. The veterinarian warned him that if Nemo put any weight on his back legs, the thousands of dollars DiPaolo had spent to make sure his dog could walk without pain would be for naught.

So, he bought a crate, threw a dog biscuit in it, and waited to see what would happen. Nemo walked in, ate the treat, and stayed. "He went right into it," DiPaolo says. "He loved it. No problem."

Put Out the Welcome Mat

DiPaolo was one of the lucky ones. While you can coax most dogs into using a crate, not all will take to it as readily as Nemo, particularly older dogs used to having the run of the house.

"It all depends on the dog," says Dave Skoletsky, a certified pet trainer. "For some dogs, it's a piece of cake. For others, it's tough. Some animals don't feel comfortable in them at all."

The key is to make the dog crate as attractive as possible. The main things you can do to make it a welcoming den for your dog: Use small but yummy treats or, better yet, his favorite toy; put the crate in a place in the house where your dog won't feel isolated; and ensure the crate fits him just right.

And, most important, don't use it as punishment. If your dog associates the crate with the consequences of doing something wrong, he will learn to hate the crate.

Establish Limits Properly

"A crate is a management tool," Skoletsky says. "It can be used properly or used improperly."

If you use a crate properly, you can easily and painlessly establish limits for your dog, particularly if you're away from home for long hours and can't monitor your dog's behavior. A crate can also be a safe haven for your dog when you have a house full of people, and he doesn't feel like coming to the party. Similarly, crates can provide a refuge for dogs who get spooked by thunderstorms, fireworks, or other unfamiliar noises.