

Positively Conditioning for a Crate

We always recommend using a crate with a dog while you are away as well as to aid in housebreaking. This way you know they are contained and safe and not destroying your furniture, having potty accidents, getting into the garbage, etc. Every time your dog gets away with performing a bad behavior, it makes it that much harder to extinguish. Utilizing the dogs "Denning Instinct" can help, especially with housebreaking. Dogs generally don't like to potty where they sleep and being contained in a crate will prevent them from having accidents. Of course, if a dog is VERY anxious when crated, that anxiety can cause the dog to have accidents. Additionally, if the crate is too large, the dog can find a corner to potty in without having to lay in it. The goal of this training is to make the crate a wonderful place for your dog so that he is comfortable and content while he is in there.

A crate should represent the dog's den. A place that is all their own, where they can feel cozy and snug and where they can sleep without being bothered. My dog often goes into his crate on his own to nap and especially when he is scared of thunderstorms or fireworks. It is his safe place. A crate should NEVER be used as a punishment, though it can be used for confinement or for a break in play if the dog is getting too amped up. All crate time should be positive and even if you are using it to give the dog a "time out", the dog should be rewarded for going into its crate and spending time in there quietly and calmly.

Many rescue dogs have had bad experiences being confined and will require extra patience during this training. If this is the case, it is best to have two crates to start with if space and money allows: one that you can put the dog in while you are gone for the duration of the training, and one that you are making into a wonderful, comfortable den. If you try to confine the dog in the "good" crate while he is uncomfortable with it while you are gone, it wont be a good place for very long and will make the training that much harder.

Make sure the crate is set in a quiet location where they will still feel like a part of the goings on. The crate should be covered, either a plastic airliner type or a wire crate covered in blankets. Plastic crates generally work better for dogs that will destroy the bedding and there are no bars for them to chew on and potentially injure their teeth or mouth. Make sure it is sturdy enough for your dog's size and power, they can easily hurt themselves if they damage the crate during a panic episode. Fill it with comfy blankets (or a rubber mat they cant reach if they are destructive). **It should be big enough for them to comfortably stand, turn around and lay down sprawled out, but no bigger.** Anything bigger does not give them the cozy den feeling and will not trigger the denning/nesting instinct.

Crate habituation training takes different amounts of time for different dogs. Some dogs pass step 11 in days, while others may take weeks or months. Make sure you are patient and try not to get frustrated. The dog will sense your

frustration and that will just increase his distrust of the crate and the training session will fail. If you notice yourself getting frustrated, stop the training and try again later when you are feeling calmer. Training sessions should be no longer than 1 hour without a break. 1 hour tends to be the limit for the dog brain to make learning progress. Any longer than that, they will get burned out and learning will stop. Keep an eye on your dog. If he stops showing interest in the food reward or the praise, stop the session and try again later.

Crate habituation training should proceed as follows:

1. Bring the dog to the "Good" crate with a handful of small (pea sized) HIGH VALUE treats (lunchmeat, freshpet vital, hotdogs, freeze dried liver, etc, whatever is the dog's FAVORITE). Toss a few treats in the crate and let the dog go in the crate to get the treats. If the dog won't go in, put them right by the entrance and reward the dog for going over by the entrance. Once the dog is entering the crate on their own, proceed to Step 2.

2. Start moving the door to the closed position (but do not close it) once the dog is in the crate. Every time the crate door closes behind them, say "Yay! Good dog!" or whatever you use to praise your dog and give them a treat. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move on to step 3.

3. Close the crate door behind the dog for 1 second, then open it again and praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice this 10--20 times. Once your dog is comfortable with this step, move on to step 4.

4. Close the crate door behind the dog for 5 seconds, take one step away, step towards, then open it again and praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move on to step 5.

It is important not to make a big deal when you are moving away from the dog. This includes saying goodbye, or feeling anxious leaving your dog behind. Pretend that moving away from the dog is just another task that needs to be done before you leave, like turning off the lights and making sure the windows are closed. You leaving should never be made into an exciting or anxious event or it could cause your dog to develop separation anxiety!

5. Close the crate door behind the dog for 30 seconds, take two steps away, steps towards, then open it again and praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice this 10--20 times. Once your dog is comfortable with this step, move on to step 6.

6. Take a break! Learning is tiring for dogs, and with all of these treats, your dog might not be as motivated anymore to work for the food. Take 10--15 minutes away from practicing so your dog can reset himself.

7. Do step 5 again. If the dog seems uncomfortable with this after the break, backtrack to step 4. If the dog seems comfortable, go on to step 8.

8. Close the crate door behind the dog for 5 minutes, take 3--5 steps away, steps towards, then open it again and praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move on to step 9.

9. Take a break! Go play outside, or get some other work done and let your dog relax. While the dog is occupied, throw some treats into the crate so that he can get rewarded for going in on his own while you are doing other things.

10. Repeat step 8. If your dog is comfortable with this, increase the difficulty by adding time and/or distance, rewarding every time you return. From this point on, it is best to add only one new thing at a time. Go back down a step or two if the dog starts showing anxiety. It is important to remember not to rush this phase if you want your dog to be comfortable and happy in his crate while you are gone! The crate/den needs to be a place where GOOD things happen!

11. Gradually increase the time and distance until your dog can be comfortable being in a different room than you for an extended period of time (30+ minutes). A baby monitor/camera can help you determine if he is indeed comfortable, or if he is just quietly whining and panting. Both of those are signs of anxiety and training should backtrack if these are seen until the dog is truly comfortable.

Enrichment While You are Gone

Providing mentally stimulating enrichment while you are gone can help your dog keep his mind off the fact that he is alone. Toys like Kongs stuffed with Peanut Butter (NOT sweetened with Xylitol) or yogurt and frozen will keep him busy for a while. There are also a lot of toys out there also that you can put food/treats in and they have to roll them around to get the treats out. You can make your own out of PVC pipe with a hole drilled in it. There are also a ton of cool gadgets that allow you to interact with your dog through your smartphone. Some have laser toys, some allow you to talk to your dog or have a video chat. These tools can help the dog not feel so alone while you are gone, though they do tend to be pricey. Some dogs take comfort in the sound of a radio or television set on.