



Kasia Mikurda, PhD, MSc

kasia@houstondogcoach.com
(832) 532-DOGS

Weekend Crate Training

Why Crate Train Your Dog?

Used properly, a crate is an effective short-term tool for managing and training your dog. If you train your dog to be content in a crate, you'll provide a safe, cozy place that she can call her own and sleep in at night. It also gives you a safe way to transport your dog and travel with her to motels, to friends' homes, when on vacation, etc. Crates are especially helpful when introducing a new dog into your household. You can also use a crate to efficiently house train your dog and prevent her from being destructive.

Crates can be easily misused, however. They're best used as a relatively short-term management tool, not as a lifetime pattern of housing. Your goal should be to work on any behavior problems and train your dog so that it's not necessary to crate her 8 to 10 hours every weekday throughout her life. Please see our crate guidelines below, under How Long to Crate Your Dog, to avoid over-confinement and inadvertently causing behavior problems from a lack of exercise, training, socialization and companionship.

Some dogs are never happy in crates but can tolerate them when necessary. Others panic when closed in a crate (please see more information below under When NOT to Use a Crate). However, most dogs readily adjust to their crates, preferring to sleep or take refuge in them when they're tired or things get too hectic.

Using a Crate to House Train Your Dog

You can use a crate to safely contain your dog during the night and whenever you can't monitor her behavior closely. Dogs don't like to soil their sleeping areas, so your dog will naturally avoid eliminating in her crate. If used for house training purposes, the crate should be sized so that your dog can lie down comfortably, stand up without having to crouch and easily turn around in a circle. If the crate is any larger, she might learn to soil one end of it and sleep at the other. If the crate is any smaller, she might be uncomfortable and unable to rest. (When you no longer need to use the crate for house training, you can purchase a larger one for your dog if you like.)

Using a crate will help you predict *when* your dog needs to eliminate and control *where* she eliminates. If she's been crated overnight or for a few hours during the day, the chances are extremely high that she'll eliminate as soon as you release her from the crate and take her outside. So, with the crate's help, you can prevent your dog from eliminating indoors and have a chance to reward her for going in the right place—outside.

Using a Crate to Prevent Destructive Behavior

In addition to acting as a house-training tool, your dog's crate can prevent her from being destructive. Dogs and puppies need to learn to refrain from doing a lot of things in their homes, like digging on furniture or rugs, chewing table legs, cushions or other household items, and stealing from garbage cans or counters. To teach your dog not to do things you don't like, you must be able to observe and monitor her behavior. Confining her in a crate can prevent unwanted behavior when you can't supervise her or have to leave her home alone..

How Long to Crate Your Dog

At night when dogs sleep, their body systems and elimination slow down. This is why they can go all night without eliminating once they're old enough to have sufficient bladder and bowel control. But during the day, neither puppies nor adult dogs should be crated for more than four or five hours at a time. When crating a puppy for more than two hours, it's best to provide water by attaching a water bottle dispenser to the crate. (Using a bowl can create a mess.) Follow these daytime duration guidelines to avoid compromising your dog's well-being or causing behavior problems:

Age Maximum time in crate

8–10 weeks 30–60 minutes

11–14 weeks 1–3 hours

15–16 weeks 3–4 hours

17+ weeks 4–5 hours

If you have a puppy and you work all day, it's essential that you give your puppy a midday break from the crate every day for at least her first eight months. Even with a break, though, your puppy will still have to tolerate two four-hour periods of confinement. That's a long time, so make sure she gets a good romp in the morning before you leave for work, during lunch and after work. If you can't go home during your lunch break, you can hire a dog walker to visit your puppy midday, but keep in mind that she still needs quality time with you. She should get to enjoy some playtime in the morning and another play and training session when you come home from work.

If you're using the crate for house training, remember that it's a temporary tool. Your goal is to create a dog who can be trusted to have freedom in at least part of your house while you're gone. When you've accomplished this, you can still keep the crate for your dog to sleep or hang out in. Just remove the door or leave it open.

An adult dog can be crated for as long as eight hours on occasion, but daily crating of this length could compromise your dog's mental and physical well-being. Be sure that she's received adequate exercise before a long stay in the crate—at least 30 to 60 minutes. If your dog is crated overnight as well, she should receive at least 60 to 90 minutes of outdoor exercise in the morning and before being put back in the crate at night.

When NOT to Use a Crate

Dogs who suffer from separation anxiety should not be confined in a crate. If your dog shows any of the following signs of separation anxiety, please locate a qualified expert in your area:

- Destructiveness, vocalizing or house soiling during the first 30 minutes after you leave your dog alone in the house
- Destructive behaviors that consistently occur only when she's left by herself in the house
- Destructive behavior directed at windows, doors, flooring in front of doors or items with your scent, like seat cushions or the TV remote

Some dogs don't tolerate crating well due to other types of fears or anxieties, like thunder phobia. Don't crate your dog if you see signs of anxiety when she's crated, such as:

- Damage to the crate from your dog's attempts to escape
- Damage to surrounding objects that she's been able to reach while inside the crate
- Wet chest fur or a lot of wetness in the bottom of the crate from drooling
- Urination or defecation in the crate

- Your dog moves the crate while she's inside
- Excessive barking or howling during your absence (You can get reports from neighbors or record your dog's behavior using a video camera.)

In addition, don't crate your puppy or dog if:

- She's too young to have sufficient bladder or bowel control
- She has diarrhea
- She's vomiting
- You must leave her alone for longer than the time indicated in the crate duration guidelines above
- She hasn't eliminated shortly before going in the crate
- The temperature is uncomfortably high
- She has not had sufficient exercise, companionship and socialization

How to Crate Train Your Dog: The Weekend Plan

Some trainers and behaviorists recommend introducing your dog to a new crate very gradually, over a period of a week or more. This method works well for timid dogs who fear confinement and for dogs who have already learned to dislike crates. But many dogs can learn to use crates more easily, and many people just don't have the time to devote an entire week or more to training before being able to use a crate.

If you need to start using a crate as soon as possible, try the following Weekend Crate Training plan. After your training sessions on Saturday and Sunday, you'll be able to start confining your dog in her crate on Monday.

To successfully use this crate-training plan, you'll need to follow the directions below, step by step. It's important to avoid skipping ahead and leaving your dog alone in the crate before she's ready. To confine your dog at night over the weekend, put her in a small, safe area instead. You can use an exercise pen or baby gate to block off part of your kitchen, a bathroom or a laundry room. Make sure that the area is dog-proofed and free of things that your dog shouldn't chew. You can leave her with something comfy to lie on, some water, her toys and some chew things to keep her occupied. It's best not to leave your dog home alone at all during the day on Saturday or Sunday. If you must do so for some reason, you can use the same dog-proofed area so as not to deviate from your training plan.

Preparation

Choosing a Crate

Pet supply stores and online vendors sell wire crates, plastic airline crates and mesh crates. Each style has its own advantages. Wire crates usually collapse for easy storage and portability, and they provide more ventilation than plastic ones. Plastic crates seem especially den-like and might make dogs feel safer and more secure when they're inside. Mesh crates provide privacy for dogs and are the most portable, but they aren't very durable. Some dogs chew through them and escape.

Comfy Crate

After choosing which kind of crate to use, it's important to make the new crate comfortable. Put it in a room where you spend lots of time, but out of the way of foot traffic. Next, put a soft bed or blanket and a toy or two inside. You can even put a shirt you've recently worn into the crate so your dog will feel comforted by your scent. (If your dog likes to chew fabric, you can skip this part.) If you purchase a wire crate for your dog, she might like to have a blanket or towel draped over it to create a more "den-like" feel.

Friday Night: Before You Start Training

The most important part of crate training is teaching your dog to associate her crate with things she loves. Try the ideas below to convince your dog that her new crate is the place to be:

The Treat Fairy

Leave the crate door wide open and make sure your dog has access to the room where you've set up the crate. Every so often, when she's not looking, sneakily toss a few treats around and into the crate so she can discover them on her own. Use something that your dog will love, like small pieces of chicken, cheese, hot dog or freeze-dried liver. You can also leave an exciting new toy, a delicious chew bone or a stuffed KONG® toy inside the crate. Periodically leave special treats in your dog's crate throughout the evening—and continue to do so every day or so for the next few weeks. If your dog sometimes finds surprise goodies in her crate, she'll start to love it, and she'll probably go into it often just to see if the "Treat Fairy" has come.

Room Service

When it's dinnertime for your dog, place her bowl inside the crate and leave the door open. Try putting the bowl in the back of the crate so your dog has to stand inside the crate to eat. If she seems too uncomfortable to go into the crate at first, you can put the bowl just inside the door instead. That way, she only has to put her head in the crate. Over time, as your dog becomes more and more comfortable stepping inside, you can move the bowl all the way to the back of the crate and, eventually, close the crate door while she eats her meals.

Prepare Supplies for Saturday and Sunday

Over the next couple of days, you'll reward your dog often for going into her crate. It's a good idea to prepare some treats in advance. Cut some chicken, cheese, hot dogs, soft dog treats or freeze-dried liver into bite-sized pieces and set them aside for later use. You can also stuff two or three KONGs, which you'll give your dog when you start to increase the length of time she stays in her crate.

Saturday Morning: Let the Crate Fun Begin!

You're ready to get started. Gather the treats you prepared and take your dog to the crate.

Step One: Follow the Treat

You can do the following exercises sitting on the floor or in a chair right next to the crate.

1. Give a cue to ask your dog to go into the crate, such as "Go to bed." (Choose whatever cue you like, just be sure you always use the same one.)
2. Show your dog one of the treats and toss it in the crate. After she goes inside to eat it, praise her enthusiastically and feed her another treat while she's still inside.
3. Say "Okay" to let your dog know she can come out again. You don't need to reward her when she comes out of the crate. She needs to learn that all good things happen when she's *inside* the crate.

Repeat the steps above 10 times. Take a short break (just a few minutes), and then do another set of 10 repetitions. After your second set, end the training session.

Step Two: Earn the Treat

Later on in the morning, collect some treats and bring your dog to the crate for more training. Now that she's practiced following a treat into the crate, try asking her to go in *before* rewarding her with the treat.

1. To warm up, do a couple of repetitions just like you did before—throwing the treat into the crate so that your dog follows it. Then you can change the rules a little.
2. Give your cue, “Go to bed,” and point to the crate instead of throwing a treat into it. (When you point, it might help to move your arm like you did when tossing a treat into the crate. The familiar motion can remind your dog what she’s supposed to do.)
3. When your dog goes in, praise her and immediately give her a couple of treats while she’s still in the crate.
4. Say “Okay” and let your dog come out of the crate.

Do 10 repetitions and then take a short break. Repeat the exercise another 10 times—or until your dog seems to know the game and enters and exits readily when you ask her to.

If your dog seems nervous about going into the crate or confused about what she’s supposed to do when you say the cue, go back and practice Step One for a while longer. When your dog confidently rushes into the crate to get her treat, you can try Step Two again.

Saturday Afternoon: Close the Crate Door

Now it’s time to get your dog used to being in the crate with the door closed.

1. To warm up, do a couple of repetitions just like you did before. Say “Go to bed,” point to the crate, reward your dog with a treat when she goes in and then say “Okay” to let her know she can come out.
2. Now you’ll try closing the crate door for just a moment. Give your cue “Go to bed” and point to the crate.
3. When your dog goes in the crate, praise her and immediately give her a treat. Then gently close the crate door. (You don’t have to latch it yet.) Feed your dog two or three treats through the closed crate door and continue to praise her while she’s in the crate.
4. Say “Okay” and open the crate door to let your dog come out. (If your dog seems stressed or panicked with the door briefly closed, break down this exercise into two phases: in the first phase, just close the door halfway, give a treat and release your dog; in the second phase, close the door all the way.)

Do 10 repetitions and then take a break for a minute or two. Then repeat the exercise 10 more times, slowly building up the time your dog stays in the crate with the door closed. As you increase the time, throw in some easy repetitions, too. Start with 1 second, then increase to 5. Try 8 seconds, then go back to 3. Increase to 10 seconds, then 15, then 20, then an easy 5. Continue to generously reward your dog whenever she’s in the crate. After you finish your second set of 10 repetitions, take a half-hour break. Then repeat the exercise again. Over the afternoon, try to build up to having your dog stay in the crate for one minute.

Saturday Evening: Introduction to Alone Time

When your dog is used to hanging out in her crate with the door closed while you sit nearby, you can move on to the next step: leaving her alone for a little while. Repeat the exercise you’ve been practicing, just as it’s described above—but this time, latch the crate door and start to move away from the crate.

1. To warm up, do a couple of repetitions like you did in the afternoon. Sit on the floor or in a chair next to your dog’s crate. Say “Go to bed” and point to the crate. When your dog goes in, close the crate door and reward her with a few treats while she stays in the crate. After about 30 seconds, say “Okay” and open the crate door to let your dog out.
2. Now you’ll close the crate door briefly. Say your cue, “Go to bed,” and point to the crate. When your dog goes in, close and latch the crate door, and then give her a treat.
3. Stand up and give your dog another treat. Take a few steps away from the crate and then return to give your dog a treat.
4. Say “Okay” and open the crate door to let your dog come out.

Repeat the steps above 10 times, each time walking away in a different direction. After a short break, do 10 more repetitions, slowly building up the time your dog stays in the crate while you walk around the room. As you increase the time, throw in some easy repetitions. Start with 10 seconds, then increase to 15. Try 20 seconds, then go back to 10. Increase to 30 seconds, drop to 15, then up to 45, and then an easy 5. Continue to return to the crate and reward your dog every few seconds while she's inside. In the beginning, be very generous. As your dog becomes more and more comfortable resting in her crate, you can gradually decrease how frequently you treat her.

After you finish your second set of 10 repetitions, take a half-hour break. Then repeat the exercise another 10 times. Start leaving the room for a few seconds at a time, always returning to reward your dog while she's in the crate. Try to work up to having your dog stay in the crate for one minute while you walk around the room and briefly leave the room.

Sunday Morning: TV Time

This morning, you'll teach your dog to relax for longer periods in her crate. You'll need some treats, a new tasty chew bone or a KONG toy stuffed with something wonderful, like a little peanut butter or cream cheese, and something to occupy yourself. Ask your dog to go in her crate. When she does, praise her and give her the chew bone or stuffed KONG. Then close the crate door and settle down to watch TV or read a book in the same room. Keep your dog in her crate for about half an hour. (If she finishes her chew, you can periodically give her a treat or two, as long as she stays quiet.)

When the half hour is up, calmly open the crate and say "Okay," so that your dog can come out. Take her chew thing away, and don't reward her with treats when crate time is over. In fact, it's best if you just ignore your dog for a few minutes. Again, you want her to learn that great things happen while she's in the crate, not when she comes out. Take a break from training for a while. An hour or two later, you can repeat the exercise.

Canine Complaining

At this point in your training, your dog might start to object to confinement in her crate. If she barks or whines, you have two options:

1. Ignore her entirely. (Get yourself a pair of earplugs if you need to.) She's trying to get your attention, so don't reward her barking by giving it to her! Pretend she's invisible. As soon as she stops vocalizing for a few seconds, you can give her a treat. With repetition, your dog will learn that she gets ignored if she makes noise, but if she's quiet, you deliver tasty treats.
2. As soon as your dog starts to bark or whine, make some sort of noise to let her know that she's made a mistake. You can say "Oops!" or "Too bad," and then immediately leave the room. Don't come back until your dog has been quiet for at least 5 to 10 seconds. With repetition, your dog will learn that making noise makes you instantly leave but being quiet makes you come back.

It's important that you respond consistently when your dog makes noise in her crate. It might be frustrating at first, but if you stick to your plan, she'll learn that it's in her best interest to rest quietly when crated.

Sunday Afternoon: Alone Time

Before moving on to Sunday afternoon exercises, give your dog a good workout. Take her outside on a brisk walk or jog, play fetch or tug, or give her a chance to play with a dog buddy. Crate training will be easier if she's tired. After you've exercised your dog, repeat the training steps you practiced this morning, but this time, instead of settling down to relax in the same room as your dog, you'll move around the house.

1. Ask your dog to go in her crate. When she does, hand her a delicious chew bone or a stuffed KONG. Then close the crate door and walk out of the room.

2. Stay out of the room for 10 minutes. After the time's up, you can return and let your dog out of the crate. (If she hasn't finished working on her chew thing, take it away after she leaves the crate. She only gets special goodies during crate time.) If your dog makes noise in the crate while you're gone, don't return to let her out until she's been quiet for 5 to 10 seconds.
3. After a short break, repeat the exercise.

This afternoon, continue to repeat the steps above, slowly building up the time your dog stays in her crate. Try to work up to one full hour of alone time.

Sunday Evening: Time to Leave the House

If your dog can quietly rest in her crate for an hour while you move around the house, you're ready to leave her home alone. Ask your dog to go in her crate and give her something delicious to chew or eat, just like you did before. Then close the crate and, without saying any goodbyes, leave the house for about 10 minutes. When you return, calmly let your dog out of her crate and take away her chew. Resist the urge to celebrate. Your dog will feel most comfortable going into and out of her crate if you act like it's no big deal.

Repeat the exercise as often as possible before bedtime, with exercise and potty breaks in between training times. Try to build up to leaving your dog in her crate, home alone, for an hour or two.

The Weekend's Over... What Next?

Now that you've completed the Weekend Crate Training plan, your dog can start to stay in her crate whenever you leave the house, overnight and when you can't directly supervise her during the day. Abide by the crate duration guidelines above, and keep the following tips in mind to make sure your dog continues to feel comfortable in the crate:

- Always try to thoroughly exercise your dog before crating her. (Aim for at least 30 to 60 minutes of aerobic exercise.) If you crate your dog while you're at work *and* overnight, she'll need lots of quality play time and exercise with you when she's not in her crate. Always take your dog out for a potty break before crating her and right after letting her out of the crate.
- Continue to feed your dog her meals inside the crate and always leave her with something to chew when she's in her crate. (Speak with your veterinarian for advice about what's safe for your dog to chew while she's alone.) If you reserve special things, like dinner, new chew bones, stuffed KONGs and pig ears for crate time, your dog will learn to love going into her crate.
- Leave your dog's crate open so that she can access it at all times. Many dogs choose to rest inside their crates even when they don't have to.

Having Trouble?

Crate training can be challenging for some dogs. A professional trainer will offer group or private classes that can provide lots of help with crate training.

Troubleshooting

My Dog Makes Noise in the Crate

Although it might be difficult, resist the urge to yell at your dog if she complains in her crate. She might respond by quieting down—but the attention from you, even though it's negative attention, might *increase* her barking and whining instead. Scolding might also upset your dog, and you want to make her time in the crate as stress-free as possible. It's also crucial to avoid breaking down and releasing your dog from the crate when she's making noise. Doing this will send her a clear message: If she barks and whines long enough, you'll eventually let her out! The key is to teach your dog that you *won't* let her out of the crate if she's making noise—but you *will* reward her with treats or let her out if she stops.

However, if you have a young puppy, she might not be able to sleep through the night without having to eliminate. If your puppy whines in the middle of the night and you think she might need to go out, *do* let her out of the crate. Then you can take her directly to the place where you'd like her to eliminate and wait. If she doesn't go within a minute or two, take her back inside and return her to her crate. Don't let her romp around during the potty break. You don't want her to learn that if she whines in her crate, you'll take her out for playtime!

My Dog Is Afraid to Go Into the Crate

Dogs who seem very nervous about going into crates might need preliminary training with crate-like objects. If your dog seems reluctant to step into a crate, you can try teaching her to walk under a suspended tarp or blanket, step between two upright boards or lie down in the bottom half of an airline crate (with the top removed) *before* trying to coax her into an enclosed crate. When you start training with an airline or wire crate, it might make your dog more comfortable to remove the door or simply leave it ajar. If you have a mesh crate, flip the door up over the roof to keep it open. It can also help to teach your dog Sit, Down, Stay, Step Forward and Step Back. These skills will give you more control when you're asking your dog to do specific behaviors in and around her crate.

After some preliminary training with less scary crate-like objects, you can try Weekend Crate Training, but instead of spending a day on each step, try going through the plan more slowly. Only progress to the next step when your dog seems completely comfortable.

My Dog Panics in the Crate

If your dog experiences extreme anxiety when you try to confine her in a crate, let her out immediately and seek the help of a professional dog trainer or behaviorist.

My Dog Guards Things or Behaves Aggressively in Her Crate

Dogs who guard their belongings sometimes also guard the area around their crates. If your dog has guarded objects, food or places in the past, always be cautious when walking by her open crate or when removing her from the crate. Avoid reaching into the crate to pull your dog out. Instead, you can entice her out or lift the crate up from the back to "spill" her out.

Some dogs seem to feel vulnerable and trapped when they're in crates or other small spaces. These dogs might react with aggression when approached by unfamiliar people or dogs while inside their crates. If this sounds like your dog, please seek guidance from a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB), a veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB) or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT). If you elect to hire a CPDT because you can't find a behaviorist in your area, be sure to determine whether she or he has professional training and experience in successfully working with aggression. This work is beyond what CPDT certification requires, and you need to be sure the trainer is qualified to help you.

Decreasing Confinement, Increasing Freedom

You can begin to give your dog more freedom in your house while you're gone once she's thoroughly house trained, has eliminated consistently outside with no accidents for at least one month, and chews or destroys only her own toys—*not* your house or household items. The right time to give your dog more freedom will depend on her individual personality. Some dogs can be destructive when alone until they are about two years old, while others can be trusted at one year or less.

Here are some suggested steps toward increasing your dog's freedom outside the crate:

- Start with brief absences with your dog free in your house. Be sure to dog-proof your home before you go. Put your garbage away and pick up items you don't want your dog to chew. Leave out several toys that she *can* chew. You want to set her up to succeed!

- Don't give her freedom in the whole house at first. Use baby gates or close doors to prevent her from getting into rooms you don't want her in yet. Or try confining her to just one room, like the kitchen or laundry room.
- Walk out the door and run a short five-minute errand. If you come home to a mess, try a shorter absence.
- If, after a couple more attempts at short absences, your dog is still making messes, she might not be mature enough to be left alone in the house yet. Alternatively, her continued destructiveness might mean she has separation anxiety.
- If you return and there are no messes, gradually lengthen your absences. For example, start with five minutes. Then try a half-hour, then an hour, then two hours and, finally, four or five hours (the maximum recommended length of time).

What NOT to Do

- Do not use a crate to contain your dog simply because she's a nuisance and requires attention. A puppy or young dog can sometimes be annoying and exhausting, but it's unfair and negligent to lock her up rather than provide the training she needs.
- Do not put your dog in her crate to punish her. If you do, she'll probably come to dislike the crate. It's fine to use the crate sparingly as a time-out place, but your dog should have many more pleasant experiences with her crate to counteract any possible unpleasant associations.

* Courtesy of American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals® *