

Crate Training

Why should you consider crate training?

A crate is a functional way to keep your dog safe while unsupervised, give him a comfortable place to rest away from the hustle and bustle of a busy family gathering, and prevent unwanted behavior (when paired with an effective training plan), among other things. Like any other behavior, a dog needs to learn how to settle comfortably in a crate, should you decide to use one. A thoughtful plan to help your dog be comfortable with their crate would include introducing them to it gradually. Your dog should be relaxed throughout the whole process of helping them learn this skill. You'll know you're moving too quickly if you observe behaviors like drooling, destructive behavior in the crate, going to the bathroom in the crate, barking, pacing, circling, or refusing to go into the crate altogether. Those and other behaviors are indications that your dog is stressed, and mean you should slow things down. Contact the MSPCA for additional recommendations.

Choosing the right crate: To serve as a safe and comfortable place for your dog to rest, a crate should be big enough so that your dog can stand up without hitting their head on the top, turn completely around, and stretch out on their side. If possible, you should provide your dog with a soft blanket or dog bed to make their crate as comfortable as you can.

Introducing the crate:

- Set up the crate in an area of the house that is quiet and comfortable for your dog, but that also allows visual access for both you and the dog.
- Leave the crate door open at all times.
- Periodically leave treats in the crate when the dog is not paying attention so that they find them later when they wander near or into the crate.
- **Do not** guide your dog toward or encourage them into the crate. **Do** keep a close eye on them and give lots of (calm) praise when they go in on their own.
- Anytime you see them in their crate, take a few minutes to calmly pet them from outside of the crate. If you see them lying down in the crate, pet them for even longer.
- Feed your dog meals in the crate (with the door **open**).

Increasing duration of your dog staying in his crate:

- Once your dog is comfortable lying in his crate, begin to reinforce laying in that space. Do this by calmly and quietly petting for about 1 minute intervals or delivering a food reward or long lasting chew.
- Gradually increase the amount of time that your dog comfortably settles in the crate by inserting short breaks between reinforcement. If petting, remove your hands for 1 second, and then 2, then 3, etc.

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Closing the crate door:

- Once your dog can remain in the crate for about 30 minutes while you are sitting nearby, begin closing the crate door.
- Close the door for just 1 second, then open again, then pet. If they remain calm while you close the door, continue onto the next step. If at any point they try to get up, allow them to leave and re-assess the situation, you likely moved too fast. Try again next time you see them lying in their crate. Do not force them to stay in the crate or to return to the crate.
- Increase the amount of time that your dog remains comfortably settled in the crate with the door closed by providing long-lasting chews or food enrichment items while the door is closed, only when the dog was already settled. Open the door before they finish their snack, or before they begin to become restless/try to get out of the crate on their own.

Things to keep in mind:

- Your dog should never be closed in their crate before they are able to comfortably settle or sleep in their crate for at least one hour at a time.
- Your dog should be relaxed throughout the training process. If at any point they try to get up, allow them to leave and re-assess the situation, you likely moved too fast. Try again next time you see them lying in his crate. **Do not** force them to stay in the crate or to return to the crate.
- Keep sessions short – 10-20 minutes max. (unless you are to the point where you are increasing the duration past 20 minutes).
- End the session if the dog becomes anxious or restless. Ignore him for a while and do not allow access to other reinforcers immediately after the session.

Increasing duration of your dog staying in the crate with the door closed:

- Increase the amount of time your dog can stay in their crate with the door closed in increments of 15 minutes. Vary whether they will be in his crate for long or short amounts of time (ex: they stay in the crate for 30 minutes, then 45, then 20, then 45, then 30, then 60, etc.).
- Give long breaks between each session (go for a walk, spend time together around the house, etc.)
- Continue increasing the amount of time they can stay in the crate until they can rest for 4 hours.

When to reach out for additional support: Some dogs become stressed when confined, or struggle with behaviors related to separation distress or anxiety. If your dog struggles with the above steps, or if you observe your dog becoming restless, excessively drooling, vocalizing, attempting to escape, or other behavior that might indicate extreme stress or discomfort, contact the MSPCA for additional behavior support.