

Sarah Whitehead's
 Inner
Circle
Owner Guide

The definitive guide to indoor crate training

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The definitive guide to indoor crate training

An indoor crate should be a safe, warm cocoon that dogs love and humans dream of!

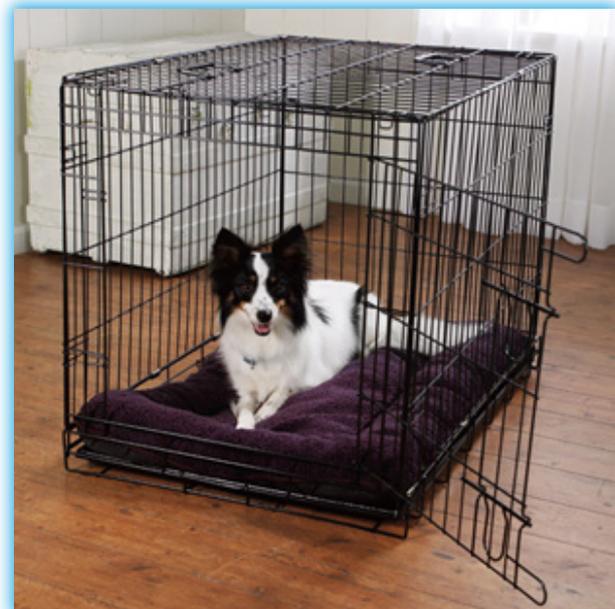
The virtues of crate training are many and varied. It's a place where you can put your puppy when you can't supervise or when either of you need a little time out, as well as the perfect sleeping area.

In fact, quite how new puppy owners manage without one is beyond me! Puppies have a sleep-wake cycle that is pretty intense. When they are awake, they are truly awake. They want to run, pee, poo, sniff, chew and explore – often at high speed. This relatively short period of full-on activity is, of course, a perfect time to take advantage of the pup's need for stimulation – to get him or her out and about, or to do some training – or both.

All this before he falls asleep again. Then, once asleep, he's out for the count, and really needs to be left undisturbed. Of course, the fact is that even though your new pup is adorable and entrancing, there are still things that you have to get on with. Just because your puppy is 12 weeks old doesn't make the washing go away, or mean that you can stop taking the kids to school. Because life sometimes gets in the way of puppy supervision, the question is how are you going to make sure that your puppy, your home, and your sanity, remain intact during this busy phase?

The answer, of course, to those in the know, is the humble crate. A crate need not be a caged prison, destined to separate dog from family when they can't be bothered with it anymore. Nor should a crate be an excuse not to train the dog properly – after all, house training, good manners in the house and sociability with humans all need time and input.

Crate training helps with all kinds of average puppy needs. It prevents your little darling chewing through electric cables while your back is turned, it can help with house training (dogs rarely want to toilet in their bed area) and it can help protect the pup from over-pestering by children or other dogs.



In my opinion, it also helps to prevent (or even resolve) separation issues in dogs that are prone to becoming over-attached to their owner. If you have a dog that would like to live as your shadow – following you from room-to-room, and crying outside the bathroom door, then encouraging him to use the crate as a safety area - away from you for short periods - is especially useful for teaching him that he really can cope on his own. Of course, nothing could be more important for rescue dogs, who can be inclined to over-bond with their new owners almost overnight, causing problems which are as distressing as they are impractical.

An indoor crate should be the equivalent of a hotel room for your dog – it should offer heavenly peace and quiet for sleep times, and entertainment for waking hours. If travelling, it's a home from home. However, whether your dog views it as five-star accommodation, or a prison cell is up to you – and how you introduce it is critical.

1. Size matters

The best size and type of crate is... the one that suits your puppy! In other words, what's perfect for a Chihuahua is not right for a Newfoundland puppy, and vice versa. Too big, and it's chilly and like sleeping in a warehouse. Too small and it's claustrophobic.

Ideally the crate you choose should be future-proof. Pick one that your dog will be able to comfortably stand up, turn round and stretch out in – as an adult.

Solid 'cave-like' crates may look cute, but tend to be off putting for dogs because they like to be able to see out and need good air flow. Wire crates may look like cages to us, but they allow treats to be thrown in, and contact given without having to open the door.

My favourite crates have two (or more) doors. This aids with positioning, and also allows you to train your dog to run through the crate like a tunnel in the first stages of training him to love going in.



2. Comfort is king

I don't know many people who unpack a new bed straight from the showroom, and then go to sleep on it without adding sheets, pillows and a duvet. Yet lots of owners unpack their pup's new crate, erect it, and then put the dog inside - directly onto the slippery, cold, hard plastic tray. Then they wonder why their pup refuses to settle down and scrabbles and chews the plastic to bits.

It may sound obvious, but a safe, warm cocoon of a bed needs a cosy nest of blankets or vet bed, or something similar so that it's absolutely the best bed in the house. The whole crate can also be draped with a blanket or towel to make it feel enclosed, or you can leave one side open so you can keep a beady eye on the occupant.

Water should be available (you can get clip-on bowls for the side of the crate) and you should always (ALWAYS!) make sure your dog has been to the toilet before he goes in the crate for any length of time at all.



3. Location, location, location

Ideally, for daytime use, the crate should be placed somewhere that you can keep an eye on it, and the pup can see what's going on too, but not right in the main path of household traffic.

It's important that you place it somewhere where it can be constantly accessible with the door ajar - that way your puppy can choose to go in it when he is tired - and leave again when he wants to - this choice is an important factor in the training process.

Kids need to leave the puppy be when he or she is in the crate, so bear this in mind when you position it - puppies can easily become defensive or frustrated if they are pestered or over-stimulated when they are in the crate.

4. Entertainment Central

The whole point of crate training is to teach your pup to enjoy being in there and spending time alone. So, let me ask you... how long does it take you to switch on the TV in your hotel room, or reach for your book? Providing entertainment for your pup to enjoy when in the crate is not an added extra – it's an essential.

Chews, or Kongs filled with delicious goodies, are crate-friendly favourites. Make it a rule that during the daytime, when awake, your pup is never in there without something to do. Then, (and this is most important) when he or she comes out of the crate, the door is closed – with the chew toys on the inside – so the pup has no access to them. This increases their value and ensures that being inside the crate is better than being on the outside!

5. How long is too long?

No matter how luxurious the surroundings, most people would go stir crazy in a hotel room if they weren't allowed out to explore after a couple of hours. Dogs are the same. They need company, fresh air, exercise and the chance to go to the loo. During the day, the maximum I would ever leave a puppy in a crate would be two hours. Some can cope with up to 4 hours, but never longer than this. Night-time is a bit different – but don't expect your dog to be happy about sleeping the whole night in the crate away from you if you haven't got some little practise sessions first (see point 7.)



6. My happy place (never in anger)

The crate should be a happy place for your pup – not somewhere associated with isolation, frustration or your anger. This means that although you may sometimes need to use the crate just to manage a tricky household situation such as lots of children running around, or because you've dropped something and there's glass all over the floor, you still need to follow the rules of good associations – in other words, it's not a place where you put your dog to punish it, or simply to keep it contained because you can't cope with his or her behaviour. If you are finding your pup too much to handle, then seek training or behaviour help sooner rather than later.

7. Sleeping partners

Many puppies experience distress for the first few nights that they are away from their mum and littermates and in their new home. Choosing a crate for your puppy to sleep in can reduce this dramatically. Your pup will feel safe and secure, and you can have the crate in your bedroom or hallway to start with and can gradually move it downstairs over time if you wish to. Being in the crate also reduces the risk of house training accidents as most pups won't soil in the crate.

However, if you think that you can pick your puppy up from the breeder in the morning, play with it and cuddle it all day, allowing it to sleep on your lap and be your little shadow, and then put it in the crate for the night without a big drama... think again! The shock of the separation will be just too much, and your puppy will be likely to whine, cry or bark until you let him out.

Instead, it's essential that every time your puppy looks sleepy, or falls asleep somewhere else during the day, you gently pick him or her up and put him in the comfy crate. There he can carry on sleeping, so that when he wakes up he will find himself in the crate – making it a familiar place for sleep when it comes to night-time.

10 reasons why crates are brilliant for many dogs:

- Puppy safety (Keeps your pup safe when you can't supervise)
- Home safety! (Keeps your home and possessions safe from your pup's teeth while you can't supervise!)
- Puppy protection (keeps your pup from getting into trouble with other dogs or cats in the home)
- Cat acclimatisation (your pup can't chase your cat but can see and smell him or her)
- Facilitation of fast house training
- Prevention of separation anxiety
- Separation of dogs during feeding (which prevents aggressive displays)
- Restricting exercise (when medical needs dictate)
- Travelling (much safer to travel in a crate in a car than loose)
- Home from home when staying away

Start right:

I use a combination of four different strategies to build a love-thing between dogs and crates. All three need to be implemented while you are in close proximity.

1. Sleepy puppy

- Each and every time your puppy looks sleepy, or falls asleep somewhere else during the day, you gently pick him or her up and put him in the comfy crate. There he can carry on sleeping, so that when he wakes up he will find himself in the crate – making it a familiar place for sleep when it comes to night-time.

2. Hungry puppy

- Every meal time, make up your pup's dinner. Let your pup see it and smell it, then put the dish inside the crate, and close the door, with your puppy on the outside!
- After a few seconds, open the crate door. Your puppy should shoot in, keen to eat the food – his desire heightened by a little frustration.
- Close the door and allow him to eat in peace, then as soon as he's finished, casually open the door, let him out and take him out to the toilet.

3. Busy puppy

- Stuff a puppy Kong with wonderful delicious things that your pup will love (biccies/ peanut butter/ liver paste). Make sure whatever is in the Kong cannot be accessed too easily and will take a while to lick and chew.
 - Pick up your pup, and while he is in your arms, put the Kong right on his nose so he can start to sniff and lick at it. Make sure he is very eager to obtain the goodies hiding within.
 - Whilst the pup is still engrossed in the Kong, place the pup and Kong inside the crate and shut the door.
 - Leave the pup where you can keep an eye on him without constantly reappearing. Make a cup of tea, do the washing up....
 - When you notice that your pup is coming to the end of the Kong or losing interest in it, before he whines, or indicates in some way he wishes to come out, open the crate door and let him out. Do this with as little fuss as possible. You want the experience of being in the crate to be memorably good, not the coming out. Once he's out, remove the Kong, or close the door so he cannot access it.
 - After a few goes of the above you may notice the pup falls asleep after playing with the Kong. Perfect. Do not disturb him until he wake

4. SHY PUPPY

Some dogs don't want to go into a crate because there's no clear exit. If yours is one of these, then choose a crate with two doors and teach him or her to go in on cue.

- With both doors of the crate open, pretend that you are teaching your pup to run through a tunnel.
- With your pup watching, drop a food treat into the crate through the bars at the top, so your pup has to go in to eat it. As soon as he has, lure him out through the other door – so he's effectively moved through the crate like a tunnel.
- Repeat this three or four times, until he's stepping in of his own accord before you even drop the treat into the crate. At this stage you can say, "In your crate," before he heads in, so he associates the cue with heading into the crate.
- Once your pup is really confident with moving into the crate and then out again via the different exit, you can push the exit door into a closed position, and ask your pup to go in. Reward him with a treat for going into the crate. Then, close the entry door behind him, then open the exit door immediately and allow him out. This builds his confidence and allows him choice when you invite him in.

Home alone:

All these starting strategies are designed to teach your puppy to be confident at entering the crate and associating it with good things. Now, you need to work on making sure he's happy to stay in the crate for short periods, even when you aren't around.

This can only be done by gradually building up the time that your pup is in the crate – either sleeping, eating, or chewing something wonderful.

Take this at your dog's pace. It's worth spending a bit of time on this in the first couple of weeks, as it will pay off for the next decade!

Remember, the three rules of teaching your puppy to enjoy being in the crate on his own are:

- ✓ Good things happen in the crate. These things are no longer available to your pup when he comes out.
- ✓ You act before your puppy whines, barks or cries and remove him from the crate. That way you never have to tell him off, or accidentally reinforce his demands to be let out.
- ✓ Build up slowly in the first couple of weeks. Be within sight to begin with, then gradually move away until your pup is effectively alone for 2 minutes, 5 minutes, 10 minutes and so on.

Two words of warning:

1. Never leave your dog in a crate wearing a collar of any kind. ID tags or the collar itself can get hooked into the bars in ways you cannot even imagine, and are a serious safety risk.
2. There are some dogs (usually adults) that simply cannot cope with being left alone in a crate, no matter how carefully you introduce them. This may be because they already have a separation anxiety problem, cannot cope with confinement, have a clinical problem or experience extreme frustration when restrained in any way. These dogs need a different approach and you should seek help from a qualified behaviour specialist or trainer.

