

Crate Training



Ever notice how many dogs choose to sleep under something like a table, or curled up in a ball with their shoulder bolstered into a corner? This is because all dogs are, by nature, **den animals**. Crates can be an excellent way to provide a den for your dog – a safe, quiet place to “turn off” and have a break from light, sound and stimuli. Because a crate is an artificial den, it may take some training to help your dog recognize it as a safe and comfortable place to seek refuge.

A VERY helpful tool for crate training is having a classically conditioned marker – like a clicker – so that you can mark moments when your dog is being calm in the crate from a distance, even when you’re out of the room. This is a tool that should be developed with a trainer and is something we cover in our Basic Obedience class or in one or two private lessons here at Southampton Animal Shelter.

Some suggestions to consider when purchasing a crate:

- Remember, that first and foremost, the crate is a den. It should not be an expansive space, but rather, just large enough for your dog to stand up, turn around and lay comfortably in. It should not be large enough for your dog to “potty” in or run circles in. **** This can be a tough concept for us humans to accept, as we tend to be claustrophobic and the idea of being in a crate of any size is upsetting – remember, dogs see the world very differently from us – and a snug, cozy den, when introduced properly, can provide security and comfort.***



The image on the left shows an appropriately sized crate for this dog. The image on the right shows a crate FAR too large for the puppy, but demonstrates how a divider can be used to accommodate a small dog/pup in a large crate that he may or may not grow into.

CHOOSING A CRATE

There are many different kinds of dog crates: soft/fabric, wire, designer wood and hard plastic/airline crates are the most commonly seen. The safest crate for most any dog to be left alone in is a hard plastic/airline crate. Not only does this provide the most authentic den experience, it has proven to be challenging to escape from and is least likely to injure your dog if he/she panics and tries to escape. These hard plastic/airline crates come with either two finger squeeze latches or a dial latch – both are very secure, however the dial latch is recommend for the determined escape artist.



HARD PLASTIC/AIRLINE CRATE

The best choice for dogs with separation anxiety, escape tendencies or those being “house-trained.”



WIRE CRATE

NOT recommended for dogs with separation anxiety or strong escape tendencies. More portable/storable than hard plastic/airline crates.



SOFT CRATE

NOT recommended for use with puppies, chewers, dogs with separation anxiety or tendency to escape.

The crate should be located in a quiet, well ventilated, low traffic part of the home. The front/back doors, in a closet or in the basement are NOT ideal locations – a bedroom or the family room (if it's not too high traffic or noisy) are good places to consider. Think about a place where you would want to unwind at the end of a hectic day.

INTRODUCING THE CRATE

Ideally, all dogs would be introduced to the crate as young puppies. We don't always have that luxury, but the principles are fundamentally the same when introducing the crate to any dog, regardless of age or previous experiences. However, remember there is no magic bullet to training of any kind – if you are struggling at any point during the process, do not hesitate to utilize your FREE ADOPTION FOLLOW-UP TRAINING – the trainers at Southampton Animal Shelter are always happy to lend a hand!

- Begin by feeding all meals in the crate with the door left open. Measure out the amount of food your dog is fed each day and spread it out over several scheduled meals (2-4) throughout the day. Put the food dish towards the back of the crate so that your dog must walk all the way in by him/herself to eat the meal – **remember to leave the door open!** If your dog has a strong aversion to the crate and chooses to ignore the meal to avoid going in the crate, leave the food there for 30 minutes, giving the dog plenty of time to make up his/her mind. If he/she chooses not to enter the crate to eat during that 30 minutes, then remove the food and **DO NOT** feed the dog until the next scheduled feeding. Do not worry about him/her missing a few meals (even if he/she is a puppy) – he/she will eat when they are hungry enough.
- If your dog is completely okay with going into the crate to eat his meals, you may also periodically toss a few treats or toys into the crate throughout the day, allowing him to go in and out freely.
- Hide bits of food and/or toys in the crate (under a mat or towel) when he isn't looking so when they do go in, they find a surprise and good things!
- Once your dog is comfortable coming and going from the crate with the door left open (this could be in a matter of 1 -2 days, or weeks for some dogs), you may begin to calmly and nonchalantly close the door while he is inside for short periods of time at first. Just a few moments without latching it, working up to several minutes with it latched (it is important that your dog is accustomed to the odd sound of the latch opening and closing). Toss treats through the openings in the BACK (not through the door) of the crate if your dog is calm and relaxed. If your dog becomes anxious, wait for him/her to settle, then toss a treat in the back and open the door. Teach him that being calm in the crate is the only way to get the door to open.
- **Teach him not to bolt out of the door when it opens:** Open the door quickly – if he makes a move, close it quickly again – wait for him to sit or settle, then re-open quickly and repeat until your dog chooses to wait for you to call him out (vs. just assuming he may bolt out).
** This is a process that does require some technique – please consider using your FREE ADOPTION FOLLOW-UP TRAINING to learn more about this exercise if your dog tends to bolt out of the crate.*
- **Before** leaving your dog crated while you are away from home, start by leaving him crated while you are home and nearby – while your doing laundry, or watching TV. Don't forget that you are still training your dog and remember to reward him often if he's being calm in the crate while you move about the house. Eventually, graduate to going outside for short periods of time (just half a minute or less at first). At this point in training, especially if your dog suffers from separation anxiety, it is all about trust. Do not assume that because your dog is okay in the crate while you grab the mail that he will also be okay with you going grocery shopping. Work up to this by being outside of the house, but in a place where you can “spy” on your dog so you can slowly increase the amount of time.

- While you are acclimating your dog to the crate and especially once you have graduated to the point of your dog being comfortable in the crate for 30-40 minutes, consider providing mental enrichment such as a stuffed frozen KONG toy. You may even consider feeding your dog his meals in a frozen KONG, which can keep him occupied for hours. Below are some tips for stuffing a KONG so that meals can last as long as possible.

**** If your dog is a powerful chewer, supervise your dog with any toy for a long period of time before ever leaving him unattended with it.***

**** We NEVER recommend leaving your dog in a crate for more than 4-5 hours maximum during the day and/or while you are not home. If your dog sleeps in his crate overnight, it is okay to reach 8-9 hours.***



KONG stuffing tips:

1. Fill KONG toy 2/3 full with your dog's regular kibble.
2. Add a layer of something extra yummy such as bits of cooked chicken, cooked lean ground beef, canned pumpkin, canned dog food or non-fat yogurt.
3. "Seal" the top with peanut butter and/or a Milkbone type treat.
4. Freeze overnight.

**** It's a smart idea to have 2-3 prepared KONGs in the freezer ready to go.***

HELPING YOUR DOG TO COPE WITH BEING ALONE

Dogs are pack animals, so naturally they prefer to be with their family or pack. Some dogs need more help than others in this department. Here are some tips to help your dog be more at ease when he is home alone.

Consider taking your dog through Basic, Intermediate and Advanced Obedience here at Southampton Animal Shelter. Though it seems unrelated, it's amazing to see the difference in anxiety and confidence when comparing a dog who has a solid obedience foundation, work ethic and sense of purpose to one who doesn't. Obedience classes aren't just for "bad dogs". Getting out and coming to classes with your dog can be a fantastic way to develop a mutual working respect for each other. Dogs who have this type of relationship with their owners tend to have significantly less anxiety-related problems at home.

- Ensure your dog has a predictable routine that includes daily physical and mental exercise as well as scheduled feedings. Structured walks with obedience thrown in (such as sits, downs and stays) are always a good idea, but other "games" like hide and seek that require your dog to think can also do the trick. If his mind AND body have been exercised prior to your departure, he is much more likely to be ready to rest and be at ease when you inevitably leave him home alone. Please feel free to contact our training and behavior department for ideas about how to mentally AND physically exercise your dog.
- Do you have what some call a "Velcro dog"? That is a dog that tends to follow you around everywhere. Help him learn that he can survive without being glued to your side by making a tether in the room you spend the most time in, like the kitchen or family room. Attach the tether to a sturdy piece of furniture, such as the sofa leg, and the other end to your dog's flat collar (DO NOT tether him with any corrective device like a prong collar or choke chain) and give him a stuffed KONG or another highly desirable toy. Sit near him while you watch TV, read, check e-mails, etc. and periodically get up and leave the room for short periods of time – like to get a glass of water or go to the bathroom. By tethering him and removing his ability to follow you from room to room, he will see that when you leave, you don't leave for long and you always come back. *** Remember to be "random" in your departures from the room, so as to be careful not to cue him that you're about to leave. Also, ignore him for just a moment when you come back – don't make a big deal. Once you settle back down to what you were doing, you may offer a soft, genuine praise.**
- If you have gone through the steps of crate training your dog, and are leaving him crated while you are out of the house, develop a habit of crating your dog about 10 minutes prior to your departure and leave him in the crate for 10 minutes after you get home. This will also help your dog get out of, or not develop the habit of, going totally bonkers when you get home and are trying to get settled. Also, when you give your dogs lots of attention just prior to leaving and right when you arrive home, it can seem like a bigger void when you are gone. Essentially, you are making departures and arrivals a "big deal" when they really shouldn't be!
- Work to minimize differences between short departures and long ones.
- Sometimes leaving a radio or TV on quietly (only if these are normally on when you are home) as well as a piece of your unwashed clothing near the crate will help your dog feel more comfortable being alone, if it sounds and/or smells like your are home.
- If your dog's separation anxiety is severe, consider utilizing your FREE ADOPTION FOLLOW-UP with one of our trainers as well as consulting your veterinarian.