

Training Dogs to Love Their Crates*

By Dr. Sophia Yin

OVERVIEW

To those who are new to the concept of crate training, confinement in such a small space might seem like some sort of medieval torture. But free-roaming dogs seek shelter in small, enclosed spaces and feral cats hide in small, dark spaces to avoid being eaten by coyotes and other predators. In fact, anyone who's visited a person with cats knows that when unfamiliar people enter their home, many cats immediately run for cover in places much smaller than a comfy travel carrier. Based on this natural history, one can see how pet dogs and cats can easily be trained to perceive a travel carrier or crate as a cozy cave or a home away from home (and one that can be taken with them wherever they go). In fact, all dogs and cats should be trained to enjoy being in a travel carrier or crate so they feel comfortable traveling. For dogs, in particular, learning to enjoy staying in their crates for extended periods of time can be important for teaching them that it's okay to be alone in their "bedroom." Then they'll be less likely to develop anxiety when separated from their owners down the road. Both dogs and cats can even be trained to sleep quietly in their crates at night.

Training pets to see their crate or carrier as their personal bedroom is simple even for cranky cats and adult dogs, and usually takes less than a week. It's all about teaching them that great things happen when they're in their crate (classical conditioning). The great thing we will use is food. Throughout the process, other motivators can be used, as well.

Part 1: Turning the Crate into a Pooch Palace.



Fig.A

Fig.A: If the dog really dislikes being confined, start by feeding his daily meals just outside the crate.



Fig.B

Fig.B: When he's comfortably eating his meals in this new location, move the food just inside the crate so he has to stick his head in to eat. If he's the type of dog who will get scared if he hits the door when going in or out, start with the door removed from the crate.



Fig.C

Fig.C: The dog should readily stick his head inside the crate. If he's comfortable, he'll eat his entire meal without backing out to look around.



Fig.D

Fig.D: Gradually move the food dish farther inside the crate until the dog easily goes all the way into the crate.

*To see video depicting this protocol go to www.AskDrYin.com.

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Fig.E

Fig.E: For most dogs, reaching this point takes less than 3 days of twice-daily feedings.



Fig.F

Fig.F: Once he's finished with his meal, give him several treats (or kibble) in a row to encourage him to wait in his crate rather than dart out. If the dog is the type to dart out, shove the treat right into his face so that your hand and the treat act like a stop sign blocking his exit.



Fig.G

Fig.G, Incorrect: If the dog is coming out of the crate, either you aren't reaching in far enough or you're delivering the treat too slowly, which makes him think you want him to grab it.



Fig.H

Fig.H: When giving the treat, reach into the crate and put the treat all the way up to the dog's face, so that you don't accidentally make him come forward out of the crate to get it.



Fig.I

Fig.I: Start by giving treats in rapid succession, quickly enough to keep him inside. Then slow the rate of giving so that he learns to wait in the crate for 3-5 seconds between treats.



Fig.J

Fig.J: Between treats, your treat-holding hand must be far enough from the dog that you're not luring him out. Try tossing the treats or kibble in to him. If he reaches for the treat when you're holding them outside the crate, pull the treat away quickly so that it's clear to him that he doesn't get it.

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Fig.K

Fig.K: When the dog is waiting calmly in his crate, toss the treat inside or hand it to him. Repeat this process for 5-10 treats.



Fig.L

Fig.L: How do you know when he loves his crate? He will randomly go in it and lie down to rest on his own.



Fig.M

Fig.M, Tip: Hide tasty treats in the crate for him to find throughout the day. The goal is to have him learn to explore the crate for treats. Consider rigging a Kong toy with treats in it to remain in the crate. To do this, place a rope through the Kong and add a clasp so that you can clip it to the bars of the crate. Fill the Kong with part of his meal or treats, perhaps mixing in some canned food and freezing it to make it last longer.



Fig.N

Fig.N, Tip: Hide treats under bedding and in the back of the crate so that he has to go all the way inside.



Fig.O

Fig.O, Tip: Tether a filled Kong toy in the crate so the dog has to eat it there and can't drag it out.



Fig.P

Fig.P, Tip: The Kong toy makes the meal into a puzzle for the dog—like eating a bone. It allows for a longer period of practice with the door closed. The dog is learning that being in the crate is a pleasant experience.

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Part 2: Teaching dogs to stay in their crate for extended time periods.

Dogs should learn to rest quietly in their crates for extended periods of time; this will help them learn to remain calm when separated from their owners. Many puppies whine and bark when you leave them alone because they want to be where the action is. When this behavior is rewarded at an early age, it can progress to severe separation anxiety such that you can never keep the dog confined in the house or even in a room because he will bark persistently and destroy everything.

Proper crate training helps prevent the development of anxiety and barking when dogs are separated from their owners by a barrier or left alone in the house. For some dogs, the pleasant association already established with the crate is enough to teach them to remain quiet and calm when left in it. For others, as soon as they finish their meal or Kong toy, they start to whine or bark to be let out. These dogs must be specifically trained to be quiet in the closed crate. It's not enough to just have treats in the crate and hope their pleasant experience allows them to rest quietly in the closed crate at all times.



Fig.Q



Fig.R

Fig.Q: Dogs who vocalize in the crate should be rewarded intermittently for being calm and quiet instead. Hang out near the crate and periodically toss treats inside (perhaps do this while you are watching television). Then systematically increase the interval between treats so that you can use fewer and fewer treats. Also, gradually increase your distance from the crate. The dog should eat the treats immediately; failure to do so indicates that the dog is anxious or not hungry and the food is no longer a reward.

Fig.R: Alternatively, use the MannersMinder remote-controlled, automated dog training system (formerly known as the Treat 'n Train). The food-dispensing portion of the machine can be set to release kibble or round treats at rates of every 3, 5, 7, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 45, 60, 120 and 300 seconds. Start with the treats dispensing frequently enough so that the dog does not become anxious and bark. Then systematically teach the dog to remain quiet for longer time periods by increasing the interval between treats. If he does bark, stop giving treats until he's quiet again so that he's not accidentally rewarded for barking. The dog should be let out before he becomes satiated. Eventually, the dog will no longer need treats to remain quiet. Either his meal or treats can be used for the training session.



Fig.S



Fig.T

Fig.S,T: To adapt the MannersMinder for dispensing into crates, remove the food bowl and fold two 3 x 5 index cards and attach them with tape to form a chute. Treats can be dispensed using a remote control or the MannersMinder can be switched to automatic so that it dispenses at a rate that you set.

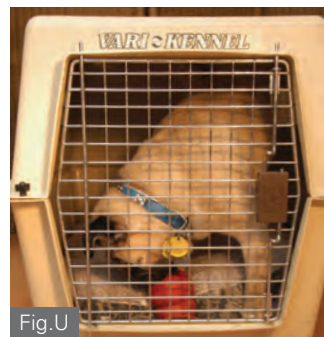


Fig.U

Fig.U: To extend the meal when not using a MannersMinder, give the dog a bone or provide a filled Kong.

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Part 3: Teaching the cue word, “kennel” or “crate.”

If you want the dog to go into the crate upon hearing a verbal cue, follow the steps below.

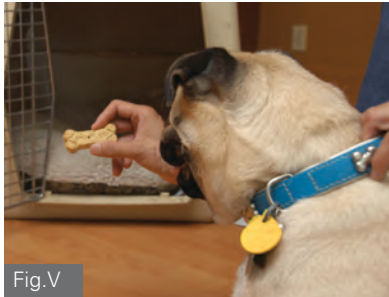


Fig.V

Fig.V: Once the dog anticipates crating by running in as soon as he sees you bring food, teach him the cue word “kennel” by keeping him outside the crate until you put his meal in it. Hold his collar so he can’t get into the kennel. Next, say “crate” or “kennel” right before you release your hold on his collar and let him run into the crate.



Fig.W

Fig.W: Practice training this cue word randomly throughout the day by walking with the dog toward his crate and saying “kennel” or “crate” right before tossing a treat inside. Say the cue word before you toss the treat so he learns that the word predicts his chance to earn a treat by running into the crate. Alternatively, you can hold his collar so he doesn’t have a chance to run into the crate until after you say the cue word, followed by releasing his collar.



Fig.X



Fig.Y

Fig.X, Y: Once the dog goes inside, toss more treats to the back. You’re trying to teach him to stay in there and wait for you to toss more treats.



Fig.Z

Fig.Z: Once he turns around to face the crate door, give him treats for sitting or lying patiently inside. Increase the interval between treats so he learns to wait longer to get his treat.

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Part 4: Switching from lure to reinforcement to train the dog to enter the crate on cue.



Fig.AA

Fig.AA: When you toss the treat into the crate and he runs in readily 5-10 times in a row in one session, try it without a food lure. To switch from lure to reinforcement, first hold the dog's collar while he's facing the crate. Because he's gotten lots of rewards when in the crate, he'll want to go in. Hide a treat behind your back or in your hand, or even have one already in his kennel (one that he didn't see you put in there). Say "kennel" and then release his collar.



Fig.BB

Fig.BB: Because he's reliably gone into the crate 5-10 times immediately prior to this, he should do so easily now.



Fig.CC

Fig.CC: After the dog is in, toss him the treat. Again, throw in additional treats to reward him for staying put.

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Part 5: Using other reinforcers.

If you think the dog will be difficult, add other reinforcers to speed the training. Use the things that most motivate the dog. If he loves to play fetch, then try a tennis ball. If he craves attention, maybe even whining and barking for it, then train him that the best way to get your attention is to go lie quietly in his crate.

Toys



Fig.DD

Fig.DD: Start by using the toy as a lure; show it to him.



Fig.EE

Fig.EE: Then toss the toy in while you hold the dog's collar.



Fig.FF

Fig.FF: Tell him "kennel" and immediately release his collar so he has the opportunity to run into the crate.



Fig.GG

Fig.GG: Once he's in, try playing with him while he remains in his crate. Have him give you the toy or trade the toy for treats. Then toss the toy back in again.



Fig.HH

Fig.HH: Once the dog can perform the above exercises with a toy 5-10 times in a row, start the next step where you switch to using the toy as a reinforcer rather than using it to lure him in. Begin by either showing him the ball or hiding it behind your back.



Fig.II

Fig.II: Say "kennel" but don't toss the toy in. Because he's performed the previous step so many times, he should automatically run in. If he doesn't, then continue to work on the previous step.

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Fig.JJ



Fig.KK

Fig.JJ: Once he's in, toss the toy before he runs out.

Fig.KK: Repeat this until he consistently runs in right after you say "kennel" and stays there, expecting you to toss the ball in. Some dogs may prefer that you toss the ball away from the kennel so they can play fetch.

Petting and attention



Fig.LL

Fig.LL: Some dogs love petting and even demand it by whining or barking. For these dogs, crate training should focus on petting the dog when he goes into the crate. Once he's in, pet him in 5- to 10- second intervals. Stop for 5-10 seconds, then repeat the petting to reward for remaining quiet and in the crate.

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