



# To Crate or Not to Crate?

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Photo by Heather Green

**D**espite the avalanche of literature available today regarding the benefits of crate training, many people still feel reluctant to “jail” Rover, perceiving it as “mean.”

Let me address this squarely by highlighting the most important reasons to crate train. Crates take advantage of a dog’s “nesting instinct,” which tells them to keep their immediate area clean. This makes crating indispensable to effective housebreaking. Crates, properly introduced, will become the dog’s safe zone, a place to relax and be at ease, and crates make for safe transportation. They can be slid into back seats, bungee’d into pick-up trucks, slung over your shoulder (in soft airline carriers) and more. Additionally, if you are ever going to board your dog, leave him at the vet’s, send him to the groomer’s or fly him across the country, he will be crated. If you have conditioned your dog properly, the crate will be a comfortable reference point against a backdrop of unfamiliar circumstances. In other words, it will help enormously to put your dog at ease in challenging situations.


Please understand that dogs are den animals and crave the comfort of small, confined spaces. That’s why they often sleep under pieces of furniture or tucked into corners. Now, that does not mean that all dogs will immediately take to crates. With young puppies some initial resistance is connected to the fact that up until you get them they have been snuggled up with all their litter mates in a warm puppy pile. Then you pluck them away, and want them to sleep quietly in a crate—with a resulting puppy meltdown. This has less to do with the crate and more to do with the simple fact of aloneness. Older dogs can have issues with crates simply because they were never introduced to them at an earlier age—all the more reason to start crate training ASAP.

A simple way to introduce a crate is to put the crate, with a soft bed and a few toys in it, onto a hard, cold surface such as tiles, linoleum or hardwood. Be sure to either enclose the crate in a room such as a small kitchen, a hallway cordoned off with baby gates or inside the confines of an ex-pen. Leave the crate door open and let the dog figure out that the most comfortable place in the confinement zone is in the crate. If

this is not an option and you simply have to put the dog in the crate, do so. Be sure to have exercised him or her and have left two or three really yummy chewies (Kongs with cheese, bully sticks, etc.) in the crate. Put the dog in the crate. If there’s a bit of whimpering, probably best to ignore it. If the dog starts barking and complaining you can either ignore it for a short while or immediately reprimand the dog by slamming your hand on the crate or giving him a squirt from a water bottle to demand silence. Between the dog being tired, the crate being full of treats and your reprimands setting limits you should be well on your way shortly.

For the dog who has had previous bad crate experiences and literally panics anywhere near it, try the following: take the top half off the crate and put the doggie’s bed in the bottom half. Without the top on the crate the dog will simply treat this as his bed. Give this a week or two to take. Then put a chair or some other level surface behind the crate bottom and put the top half of the crate on it such that it is only slightly resting on the bottom half. Then, slowly, bit by bit each day, move the top a little further over the bottom. If the dog shows any sign of discomfort, back off a bit and try again a few days later. Eventually you will be able to slide the top of the crate onto the bottom and the dog will barely have noticed it.

In sum, whatever objections you might have to crate training, my suggestion is, get over it. Crate training your dog is one of the biggest favors you could do for him, for his own safety and for the peace of mind of you both.

Consider these words from Heather Green, *The American Dog’s* associate publisher: “We have crate-trained all of our dogs. Crate training gave us peace of mind while we were gone and comforted our dogs by establishing a safe haven of their own. Now they are no longer required to stay in the crate when we leave, but we always find them lying in them upon our return. They love their crates!” 

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Visit [www.doggonegood.org](http://www.doggonegood.org) for more information on crate training and click the housebreaking tab. You can also email Mike at: [mike@doggonegood.org](mailto:mike@doggonegood.org).