

Thinking about Crate Training

Before introducing a crate to a rescue dog, we can reflect upon what the crate might mean to the dog?



For some dogs it might mean:

1. An opportunity – a place to rest, relax, feel safe, eat in peace etc
2. A trap – somewhere to be caught, captured, stuck
3. A place of abandonment – when the door is shut people go away

Our intentions may be directed towards number 1, but our dog experiences something else.

We can reflect what rewards the dog may have associated in their previous lives to rest, relaxation etc., maybe:

- Other dogs present or close by
- Predictability - predictable sounds, surfaces, scents, routines, or temperatures
- An activity before hand – hunting, chasing, working, training
- People

Recreating some of these may help our dogs learn to associate their new environment with known behaviours and emotional states.

Teaching a dog about the crate

Being in a crate (or other safe space) is a compound behaviour, this is a behaviour that is made up of two or more behaviours and then put together.

It could look like this:

1. Locate crate – sight, scent, sound
2. Move towards crate – walking, running
3. Get into crate
4. Lie down in crate – sphinx down or settled down
5. Hold position in crate, with door open and door shut

Each one of these behaviours can be taught and rewarded. Our tendency is to focus on number 5, without fully teaching the previous behaviours. If we have a puppy whose breeder put some work into introducing the dog to the crate and getting used to separation from the group, then we may have few problems. However, our rescue dog may have a different history and we need to slow down, working on each step.

The crate I am using in the video is only for demonstration of training ideas, it is too small for the dog to spend any time inside. The correct sized crate should allow the dog to stand up, turn around and lie out flat.

Some teaching ideas

Move towards the crate

1. prepare your dog's dinner (if they are fed kibble), or training treats on top of the crate when the door is open. Do not look at your dog, but 'accidentally' drop a few in between the bars. When they run in to eat the treats, you can stop, notice, and praise, adding the cue e.g. 'in the crate' (association).

<https://youtu.be/hLpks3kbwuE>

2. Open the door of the crate, place a food bowl or container just inside the door. Lure your dog towards the crate, drop food as you go, throw a piece into a crate, begin to place food in the container, leaving longer gaps. If your dog runs out of the crate you are going too slowly, speed up the rate of delivery. Give the 'out you come' cue before the last treat and feed the last treat outside.

<https://youtu.be/4YX3PKX-uPM>

Note: remember from our discussion that the cues need to be separated. In the case of the 'out the come' cue, your hand on the handle and your voice cue must be separate. In the video I open the door and continue to cue 'wait', choose which method works for your dog.

A dog is more likely to notice a human hand as the salient cue, whereas a voice cue is safer. A dog that jumps out of a car crate in a busy carpark for example, is a danger to itself and others. If dogs learn to wait for a voice cue, we can make sure the environment is safe before they come out.

Stay in the crate

1. Once your dog is happily staying in the crate beside the food bowl, begin to add your 'wait' cue.
2. Progress to closing the door over, continue to cue 'wait' and reward whilst the door is closed <https://youtu.be/BSnHfLre4Pw>
3. Progress to being able to take a step or two away from the crate whilst the door is closed

Note: Always give the release cue before your dog leaves the crate, as above, the door opening is not an invitation to leave.

Teaching 'lie down'

We will cover this in your luring homework, but you may choose to introduce a specific mat which also fits into the crate.

