



Training Dogs to Love Their Crates

Overview of Behavior Modification Terms and Processes

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of counterconditioning with desensitization.

With classical counterconditioning we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with desensitization, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and then gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With operant counterconditioning, we train the pet to perform behaviors that are incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns rewards and enjoys performing the behavior so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure or have her hold her nose to a target while she is handled.

Further description, examples and pictures of these terms and processes can be found in the *Low-Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs & Cats* book and DVD set.

Part 1: Turning the Crate into a Pooch Palace

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 when they fear for their safety. Based on this natural history, one can see how pet dogs 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 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. Plus it is nearly essential for potty training and providing a calm place away from visitors or unsettling situations. Then they'll be less likely to develop anxiety when separated from their owners down the road. Dogs 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 canines 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.



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



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



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



Fig.F: Once your dog is 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 your 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, Incorrect: This dog is getting rewarded for walking half-way out of the crate. If your dog is coming out of the crate, either you aren't delivering the treat far enough into the crate or you're delivering the treat too slowly, which makes him think you want him to come out to grab it.



Fig.H: When giving the treat, reach into the crate and put the treat all the way up to your 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 delivery so that he learns to wait in the crate 3-5 seconds between treats.



Fig.J

Fig.J: Between treats, your treat-holding hand must be far enough from your 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 it outside the crate, pull the treat away quickly so that it's clear to him that he doesn't get it.



Fig.K

Fig.K: When your 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 your dog 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 your dog 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.

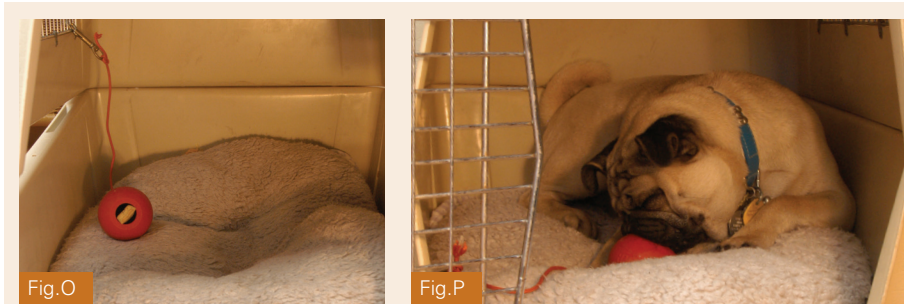


Fig.O

Fig.P

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

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

Part 2: Teaching your dog 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; but try to give the treats before he has a chance to whine. Also, gradually increase your distance from the crate. Your dog should eat the treats immediately; failure to do so indicates that your dog is anxious or not hungry and the food is no longer a reward.

Fig.R: Alternatively, use the Treat and Train (a.k.a MannersMinder) remote-controlled, automated dog training system. 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 your dog does not become anxious and bark. Then systematically teach your 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. Your dog should be let out before he becomes satiated. Eventually, your 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.U

Fig.S, T: To adapt the Treat and Train 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 a remote control or the Treat and Train can be switched to automatic so that it dispenses at a rate that you set.

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

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

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



Fig.V

Fig.V: Once your 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. The word will come to predict to him that he now has the chance to run in to the crate.



Fig.W

Fig.W: Practice training this cue word randomly throughout the day by walking with your 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. Then toss the treat in and then the cue word, followed by releasing his collar.



Fig.X



Fig.Y

Fig.X,Y: Once your dog goes inside the crate, 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 better, lying patiently inside. Increase the interval between treats so he learns to wait longer to get his treat.

Part 4: Switching from lure to reinforcement in order to train your 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 your 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.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.



Fig.JJ

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



Fig.KK

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. Try it both ways and see what works better for your dog.

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. One he's in, pet him for 5 to 10 seconds and then stop for 5-10 seconds. Repeat these steps of petting with no petting alternately while gradually increasing the interval of petting. Teward him for remaining quiet and in his crate.