

CRATE GAMES!

Training your puppy to be comfortable in a crate (or small enclosure like an ex-pen, or kennel run) is a tremendously important life skill. Even if you don't think you will ever use a crate in real life, the dog will still reap the benefits in many different ways.

We LOVE crates for our dogs, as they are so handy for many things. They are great prevention tools for puppies, and great management tools for different situations. Our puppies get crated when we can't watch them, to prevent bad behaviours from forming (peeing in the house, chewing things they shouldn't, etc), and also to assist in potty training.

By using confinement, you are giving your dog the chance to self soothe and learn to relax. You are always taking away the potential to practice self reinforcing behaviours like rushing out doors, barking at the windows, chewing, soiling, counter surfing, etc. This will also teach your dog to value the time you spend with them! Because they are earning their freedom, and consequently you are providing them with the freedom they learn that working with you brings great things!

Our older dogs get crated when people come over so they aren't nuisances (eventually get let out, but doorway chaos can be avoided), and at agility competitions (as they can't just be loose, and they need time to rest!). Dogs who are comfortable in crates are easier to travel with, easier to compete and train with, and also easier to live with.

If trained properly the crate is a safe haven for dogs to escape from the chaos of daily life. It is a safe place that is theirs, to escape noisy kids or thunderstorms.

Crate Games (created by Susan Garrett) teach the dogs many things, including: impulse control, fantastic stays, drive to work, increased motivation to work, improved focus, ability to relax in a crate, ability to deal with and work through distractions, and a great recall.

So, you probably guessed it... we train with Crate Games! It is a fantastic program that works wonders. In this post I will just write up a quick synopsis of the program. If you are interested in learning more, [Susan's DVD](#) is highly recommended!

This is the first step in using your crate as a tool to teach boundary work

Stage 1 – I Love My Crate!

This stage is all about changing the dog's mindset about the crate. Using reinforcement that the dog enjoys, you will be counter-conditioning the reinforcement. Usually, the dog finds coming out of the crate reinforcing. However, what you will be doing is making the inside of the crate the more reinforcing place to be!

You will need REALLY GOOD FOOD – something super special that the dog never gets (beef, steak, chicken, liver etc) – and a hungry dog (it is a good idea to work this game at meal time). And of course, you will need your dog's crate.

Basically the rules are that the dog is not allowed to cross the plane of the crate door (essentially, he has to stay inside the crate). If the dog breaks the plane (tries to come out), you end the game (close the door on them so they can't get out!).

Step 1 – put the dog in the crate.

Step 2 – open the crate door with one hand, and feed your dog a cookie high and at the back of the crate (so he sits) – it is important that the dog does not escape the crate!

Step 3 – close the crate door, stand up, and make sure your hand is off of the door.

Step 4 – repeat steps 2 and 3 for 5 to 10 repetitions.

Eventually, if you do this stage a lot, the dog will not try to escape the crate. Also, you are looking for your hand on the door to be a cue for the dog to sit. So keep that in mind. Though it is also important that you don't *tell* the dog to sit – we want to teach the dog to offer behaviours!

TROUBLESHOOTING – My dog is afraid of the crate!!

If your dog has had a negative experience with the crate in the past, or is just nervous about being in the crate, then you can break it down and make it easier for the dog to succeed! The goal should always be to build up the dog's confidence.

What you can aim to do is to build value for pieces of the crate!

Wire crate – remove the bottom pan, and practice getting your dog to step on it, eat on it, play on it, etc AWAY from the actual crate. When your dog is 100% happy and comfortable to be on the bottom pan, then gradually start to move it closer and closer to the crate. Eventually, slide the bottom pan back into the crate, and hopefully the dog will be confident to try going in!

Plastic/hard sided crate – If your crate comes apart, then you can try getting your dog to just climb and play inside of the bottom half of the crate, with the lid nowhere around. As the dog gets more comfortable and offers to climb in the bottom, then you can slowly add the lid back on.

You can also use shaping to get the dog to go inside the crate before you begin the crate games. Start with the crate door open, and sit next to the crate with a handful of cookies. At first, each time the dog looks at the crate, mark and reward. Then, watch the dog and mark and reward for movement towards crate, one foot in the crate, two feet in the crate, then 3 or 4 feet in the crate, etc. Always reward lots for the dog being inside the crate, and they learn that they get nothing for coming out!

The end of this video shows Lisa working through Mari's crate anxieties by removing the bottom half of the plastic crate.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7C4-gpES2c>

Stage 2 – Are You A Gambler?

This stage is all about increasing the challenge! What can you do and have the dog stay inside the crate? The same rules apply: if the dog stays, feed; if the dog tries to escape, close the door. In between each step, **close the crate door!** And if you need to, do a couple repetitions of stage one (above) before progressing).

- Step 1 – open the crate door, and delay your reach inside to feed the dog
- Step 2 – open the crate door, delay your reach to feed, stand up, then feed.
- Step 3 – open the crate door, delay, take a step away, step back and feed.
- Step 4 – open the door, delay, take two steps away, step back and feed.
- Step 5 – open door, delay, pick up leash, feed
- Step 6 – open door, pick up leash, reach leash and clip onto dog, feed
- Step 7 – open door, pick up and put on leash, take a step away, step back, feed
- Step 8 – open door, drop food or toy onto ground right outside of crate, feed
- Step 9 – open door, drop food or toy onto ground, take a step away, step back and feed.
- Step 10 – think of other crazy things to try – dropping more food, more toys, more steps away, etc etc.

Remember, don't help the dog! If he tries to escape, too bad – you will shut the door in his face. Here is a video of Mari at 10 weeks working on stages 1 and 2.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaobE4JSOUs>

Stage 3 – Yer Out, Yer In

This stage is all about testing where you are at in the game!

Step 1 – open the door, reach in and clip on the dog's leash, stand up, then reach in and reward the dog for staying

Step 2 – with the crate door still open, release the dog ("okay" or "break" – whatever your release cue is) – hang onto that leash!

Step 3 – once the dog is out of the crate, just wait and see what he does – you are looking for the dog to come out, and immediately (or quickly) turn around and go back into the crate on his own. Don't help the dog at all by saying any words or moving towards the crate – if you have built the value IN the crate, the dog should be going there! When the dog goes back in, toss a couple cookies to the back of the crate and have a little party!

Step 4 – go back and do STAGE 1 again – build value once again for the crate, before you try this stage again (even if your dog was brilliant).

Here is a video of Mari at 4 months working on stages 2 and 3.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15SrTzi67Q4>

Stage 4 – Collar Grab and Naming the Game

Once the dog can happily and easily find the crate on their own in STAGE 3, then you will want to start to name the game!

Bring the dog just outside of the crate with the door open (I like to bungee it open so it doesn't smack the dog on his way by!). Hold the dog's collar, and aim him towards the open crate.

Say the cue that you want to use ONCE, and then let go of the dog's collar. Ideally, he will drive into the open crate with enthusiasm! When he gets into the crate, toss in a couple cookies as a reward.

Continue to do this, and change your position and distance each time. If the dog doesn't understand, go back to STAGE 1 and build more value for the crate.

Please note, in the video below, the behaviour isn't named yet as the puppy was still getting valued built into the action of going into the crate.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmbfpAVIxDo>