

Controlling Stealing and Teaching the “Give” Command

What is the best way to deal with “stealing” in my puppy or dog?

Most puppies and many adolescent dogs love to explore and chew, so it’s no surprise when they steal household objects. When you try to get these items back from your dog, a chase ensues both because the game is fun and the dog enjoys the attention and because the dog is reluctant to give up its newfound “treasure”. Dogs may raid garbage, steal food off tables and countertops, and enter cupboards or refrigerators, where they help themselves to snacks. Despite owner attempts at punishment, these behaviors continue. Why?

When dealing with an unwanted behavior, look for the motivation. Food items are appealing on their own. Some puppies steal objects when they are left unsupervised, because they have not been directed to an acceptable activity. Puppies may continue to steal because the game of chase is so much fun. Each of these motivations has a different treatment.



If left to their own devices, most puppies will get into what we would refer to as “trouble”. It is important to supervise your puppy at all times. Keep the puppy with you and in sight. Be sure that you schedule adequate play times daily so that you are helping your puppy engage in the proper behavior. Arrange the environment so that the puppy cannot get to items. For example, close doors, use barrier gates, crate training or motion sensor devices to monitor where your pet can go. It might be helpful to booby-trap objects with taste aversives or motion detector alarms (see our handout on ‘Behavior management products’), to teach the puppy to ‘stay away’. At the same time, non booby-trapped items should be located nearby so that the pet learns the safe and acceptable alternatives that it is allowed to chew and play with.

If your puppy continues to steal in your presence, the best means of monitoring and prevention is to leave a long leash attached, preferably to a head halter. Then as the puppy begins to wander, or puts its nose into “out of bounds” areas, a quick pull on the leash coupled with a “leave it” command will teach it to stay away. (See our handout on possessive aggression for additional tips) Bitter sprays on these objects will prove to the puppy that these items are distasteful if it accidentally gets close enough to put its mouth on the object. Then, when there are items that the puppy is allowed to pick up, use the command, ‘take it’. This ‘take it’ command can even be extended to the food bowl or when giving treats or toys to your dog. Before offering the toy, treat or food, first have the puppy sit, and then give the ‘take it’ command when its time for the reward. The goal is not only that the puppy learns the ‘leave it’ command, but also that the pup learns only to pick up

objects when it has permission to do so.

If your puppy is stealing things because the game is so much fun, then don't play. Avoid the chasing game wherever possible. If the puppy is wearing a long leash, then use a 'come' command and pull on the leash. Have the puppy sit, show a treat and when the puppy drops the object say 'good dog'. For some puppies, if you ignore them when they steal things and try to engage them in something else instead, they may "give up" the object voluntarily. A puppy that is used to being chased may begin to approach you in an attempt to solicit chase. Should this occur, try crouching down and in a happy voice, with open arms call your puppy to you. When the puppy looks toward you, say "good puppy, come show me!" Keep up the praise as the puppy approaches. With a treat, entice the puppy to come, show the treat and when the puppy drops the stolen object, say 'good dog'. Make it come closer, sit, and then give the reward. Of course once the dog has learned the 'give' command (below), this command should be used instead.

Most importantly, never reach for your puppy in anger after it has taken something. Remember, the behavior you want to change is the stealing, not the cowering under the table. When you threaten your pet in that way, you risk fear and aggression. In addition, you are reducing, not improving the chance that your puppy will give up the item voluntarily. In fact, threats and punishment are likely to make your puppy increasingly more possessive. For dogs with well-established stealing behaviors coupled with avoidance responses see our handout on 'possessive aggression: food and toy guarding'.

How can I stop stealing in my absence?

This requires either preventing access to problem areas or using "booby-traps". Booby-traps give punishment from the object while the act is occurring and are more helpful in correcting problem behavior. Examples of these devices are shaker cans, Snappy Trainers®, Scat Mats®, extremely bitter or hot tasting sprays or electronic avoidance devices such as motion detectors (audible or citronella spray) and citronella spray avoidance units (where the dog wears the collar and a transmitter dish activates the spray if the dog gets too close (See our handout on 'Behavior management products' for more details). A motion detector spray canister filled with air is also now available. Shaker cans are empty soda cans that have pennies in them. By rigging them to fall easily, they will startle a dog when disturbed. Over time the pet may learn to avoid the area or the sight of the punishment device (See our handouts on canine punishment and behavior products).



For dogs that are stealing food items or raiding the garbage, then prevention is necessary as no amount of punishment will be sufficient to deter a dog that has access to a highly motivating food item. Consider two trash containers in your kitchen; a small one in a cupboard or on a counter that is out of reach, in which food items are placed, and a large one for non-edible trash that can be left out in the room. This might totally deter food stealing since garbage is no longer accessible.

How do I teach the “give it” or drop it command?

(Also see puppy handling exercises and puppy play biting.)

It is very useful if you can teach your puppy how to give up items with a command, but this is not always easy to train. First, you need to have the puppy take something in its mouth (use the ‘take’ command). Remember, if it is something very desirable, you may have a difficult time getting the puppy to let it go. A rawhide chew or rubber toy may work well. Keep your hand on the object at first and once the puppy has grasped the toy, say ‘give’, take it away and offer a special food treat. The purpose of this exercise is to get the puppy to open its mouth and release the item. At the same time you need to say, ‘give it’ so that the **action** becomes associated with the phrase. By repeated pairing of the words “give it” with the release of objects, the dog will learn the meaning of the words. Continue to practice until the puppy expects to give up the toy for the food treat and then gradually allow the puppy to have the object a little longer before using the ‘give’ command and offering the treat. Over time you can progress to more difficult items and allow the puppy to hold onto them a little longer before giving the command and offering the treat. At the end of the session you can even give the puppy a special toy such as a food filled Kong® rather than a treat as a substitute for the one you are taking away. The process is the same with older dogs. (For more information, see our ‘possessive aggression’ handout.)

If you are having difficulty getting the toy away at even the most simple step in the program, then you should a) use a toy of less value (e.g. rubber, nylon) b) allow your dog to grasp onto the toy and then give the command and begin to take it away almost immediately c) prompt the dog to give up the toy with its favored treat and d) consider a head halter and leash for controlling the head and mouth during training.

Whenever you train a new command, repetition and patience are extremely important. It is not enough to try and teach ‘give it’ for 1-2 minutes one day and expect your dog to know it the next. It is only through repetition and practice that the behavior will become solidified.

How can I stop my dog from getting on the furniture?

This is another “owner absent” behavior. In order to control it, you first need to teach your pet that going onto the furniture is not allowed and that any attempt to go on the furniture when the owner is present must be prevented. (A leash left attached or a remote citronella collar can be used to immediately deter or interrupt jumping on the furniture). If you cannot supervise, prevent access by closing doors or baby gates, or deter the pet from entering a room or jumping onto a table using motion detector alarms, Snappy Trainers®, Scat Mats®, Motion detector spray devices, or alarm mats (see our handouts on ‘Behavior management products’ and ‘Canine punishment’).