

CONTROLLING STEALING AND TEACHING THE "GIVE" COMMAND

What is the best way to deal with "stealing" in my puppy?

Most puppies love to explore and chew, so it's no surprise when a young puppy steals household objects. When you try to get these items back from your dog, a chase ensues. Pups may raid garbage, steal food off 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, puppies will get into 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 can be helpful to booby trap objects with taste aversives or motion detector alarms, 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 will teach it to stay away.

If your puppy is stealing things because the game is so much fun, then don't play. Instead of chasing your puppy all over the house, 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.

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 puppy in that way, you risk fear and later aggressive behavior. 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.

How can I stop food stealing in my absence?

This usually requires 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, and motion sensors. Shaker cans are empty soda cans that have pennies in them. By rigging them to fall easily, they will startle a dog when disturbed. Snappy Trainer is a mousetrap that has a large red flap on the end. This flap not only prevents the dog from being injured when the trap is sprung, it also sends a visual message to the dog. Scat Mats are mats to place on furniture that administer a correction when touched. Motion sensors are available at many electronic and hardware stores. Some sense vibration, while others sense movement. When disturbed, they emit a noise that scares away the dog. Sometimes taste aversive products (pet repellents) are effective. If the dog is stealing food items, they must be made inaccessible. No amount of punishment will be sufficient to deter a dog who has access to a highly motivating food item.

How do I teach the "give it" command?

It is very useful if you can teach your puppy how to give up items with a command. This is not easy to do. First, you need to have the puppy take something in its mouth. Remember, if it is something very desirable, you may have a difficult time getting the puppy to let it go. You may need to entice your puppy to "give up" an item by using another item. This can be another toy, a chew bone or even a 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.

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 need to be able to punish the dog immediately when it begins to get on the furniture. Once again supervision and remote control punishment devices are helpful. 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 detectors, Snappy Trainers, Scat Mats, or alarm mats.