

Stealing

Socks, remote controls and teddies are just some of the things you might find mysteriously disappearing at home or being paraded around for a game of chase! If this sounds familiar then don't worry, this handout provides lots of useful tips to help reduce this behaviour.

Why do some dogs steal items?

You might be surprised to discover that in most cases this is something that humans have inadvertently encouraged their dogs to do!

All puppies will explore with their mouths and will naturally try picking up or chewing most things they come across. If a puppy picks up their owner's slipper and finds it fun when their owner gets up and starts chasing them, and then subsequently wrangles the slipper out of their mouth as though they're having a game of tug, the puppy might pick that slipper up in order to enjoy the 'game' again. This goes for any item that gets the same exciting response. The puppy doesn't know whether this is wrong or right, they just know that it is fun, and puppies do fun things again and again!

Preventing problems

If your puppy is stealing things because the game is so much fun, then don't play! The idea is for your puppy to learn that stealing is completely pointless because it doesn't result in anything fun happening to them as a result. The next section provides top tips and instructions on what to do.

Dogs Trust's Dog Schools across the UK provide the perfect opportunity for puppies to learn vital social skills in their puppy classes. This includes teaching your puppy to give up something nice in return for something even nicer! See www.dogstrustdogschool.org.uk for your nearest class.

What to do

🐾 Provide physical and mental exercise

Your dog might be stealing things because they are looking for something to do or for some interaction with you. Dogs need both physical and mental stimulation to prevent boredom, and giving them suitable outlets for their energy will prevent them inventing their own means of entertainment! Our **Enrichment** handout has some great ideas to keep your dog busy in the right way, such as providing suitable toys and chews, making homemade puzzle feeders and engaging them with some fun training.



🐾 Make sure the stealing behaviour is not rewarded

Dogs will do anything that works out well for them again and again! So, if your dog enjoys gaining your attention by stealing things, the best thing to do when they steal is to completely ignore them, as long as it is safe to do so. Simply wait until they lose interest and drop the item, then encourage them to do something else instead, such as play with a toy or enjoy a chew. Then you can remove the stolen item when they are distracted. If possible, try to avoid picking up the item straight away as you don't want your dog to think it's valuable because you appear to be desperate to have it!

🐾 Always reward good behaviour

Make sure you give your dog lots of praise and attention for good behaviours instead, like playing with their own toys or relaxing by themselves.

🐾 **Be prepared that things might get a little worse before they get a lot better!**

When you start to ignore your dog for stealing things, you might find that they appear confused. Especially if this behaviour would have previously resulted in you jumping up and chasing them in order to get the item back! A dog might try even harder to get the response they are expecting, so you might initially see your dog stealing more items or being very obvious about it and parading these items in front of you. Don't worry, this is part of the learning process. This might be a frustrating time for you, but being consistent and no longer giving chase or tugging the items back, and simply ignoring them instead (again, where safe to do so), will mean that over time your dog is learning that there is no point doing this behaviour. They will learn that other good behaviours, such as playing with their own toys, get your attention instead.

🐾 **Teach your dog to swap things**

Swapping items for something that your dog considers to be equally or even more valuable means your dog can feel comfortable about you taking something they like away, as you're exchanging it for something they love! For example, if you're taking away a toy, swap it for another favourite toy or tasty treat. Offer your dog the better item before trying to take what they have away. Or drop several pieces of food onto the ground slightly away from your dog, so they have to leave whatever it is they have in order to go over to eat the treats. Then you can calmly pick the item up and remove it while they are busy enjoying themselves. As much as possible, return your dog's item to them shortly after swapping it.



What if my dog has stolen something dangerous?

If your dog has something valuable or is at risk of injuring themselves, for example they might have picked up a packet of tablets, then try making a distraction that does not involve talking, touching or looking at them. For example, walk out of the room to see if they follow you, or make a noise by opening a door. Going into the kitchen and opening the fridge often works to get a dog's attention! Once your dog has dropped the item and moved away from it, get them involved in something else. Scattering a handful of treats for them to sniff out in a different room will keep them pleasantly occupied so you can pop back and move the stolen item to a place of safety. Make sure that you do not scare your dog or tell them off for stealing, as this could result in them becoming anxious or confused about you.

If your dog's stealing habits are severe, or if they are guarding the items they steal, then professional support is a good idea. Our **Resource Guarding** handout might also be useful if your dog shows signs of protecting items they have stolen.

Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your

Dogs Trust dog please email: postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk



Your nearest Dogs Trust Dog School Team are also happy to help and can be contacted via: www.dogstrustdogschooll.org.uk

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice. If you are worried about your dog, then do consult your vet.