

Counter Surfing & Thieving Dogs

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The principles outlined in this handout are intended as a general guide only. If your dog has shown aggressive behaviour toward you, your family or other people, you should speak with the instructor listed at the top of this handout.

All dogs do it at some stage - whether it's *counter surfing the kitchen bench*, stealing the garbage, begging, thieving items from around the house or even snatching things from your hands.... they can't help themselves....

It's important to recognize that this is a **perfectly natural behaviour for your dog** - dogs are scavengers from way back. This does not mean that we have to simply accept the thieving problem though. There are many strategies we can undertake to prevent items from ever being stolen or to rectify an existing thieving problem.

Apart from food stealing being an extremely annoying and frustrating habit for your dog to develop, it is also **potentially a very dangerous one** (thieving something poisonous, a sharp item or knocking over boiling saucepan).



Hey "Spot" Are You Looking For Something?

Why Do Our Dogs Steal Things Anyway?

There are **many reasons** why your dog may be stealing food and other household items. Take a look through this list to determine your dog's specific trigger or reason:

- Stealing food and other items is a **self rewarding behaviour**. What this means is that when your dog steals something the consequence is that something pleasurable/desirable occurs. This could be something like getting to eat the food he/she has stolen or receiving attention from you. This is a bad situation for us dog owners because the **thieving behaviour is being rewarded and therefore reinforced** each time your dog steals something. This means that the behaviour is highly likely to continue and most probably get worse in the future.
- Some dogs steal items of food simply because **they don't know any better** - they have never been properly taught that it is inappropriate behaviour.
- The thieving may be a **symptom of [canine separation anxiety](#)**. Dogs will often steal things like socks or shoes which have the scent of the owner they are missing on them.
- Many dogs use their thieving as a tactic to **receive attention from you**. They learn that as soon as they pick up a shoe or cushion it gets you to chase after them - a fun game!
- If you don't leave some **tasty chew toys** around for your dog it is highly likely that they will find something else to chew on - like your expensive rug.
- Obviously **if your dog is hungry** he is far more likely to scavenge (counter surf) for food on bench tops and tables.
- A **lack of adequate obedience training** can lead to this type of behavioural problem. Your dog may not respect you or may see himself as above you in the family pack hierarchy. This means that he will feel free and even entitled to help himself to anything around the house.
- **Boredom and a lack of exercise** can lead to more thieving as well as many other behaviour problems.
- A young puppy who is **yet to learn proper household etiquette** is not equipped to be left alone around food and other dangerous chewable items.

What Can We Do To Stop The Thieving!

The answer to this is not clear cut and you will probably need to do more than one thing. What you need to do is **determine the reason** for your dog's stealing habit and then come up with an action plan to put a stop to it.

Here are some general tips to **help stop counter surfing** and other stealing behaviour. We can all put these general strategies to work right now:

- **Management - Keep food and other items out of reach** - prevention is always the best option in dog training. This includes things like clearing all bench tops and locking garbage bins. By doing this you are removing the thing that is motivating and then reinforcing your dog's stealing habit.
- **Supervision is the key** to correcting a thieving dog. When you are present you can provide your dog with instant feedback regarding his behaviour. This includes both positive and negative feedback.
- Only ever **feed your dog from his dinner bowl** or as a reward during obedience training sessions. This means never throwing scraps to your dog from your dinner plate or when you are preparing your dinner.
- Provide your dog with loads of **physical and mental stimulation** throughout the day. Nice long walks on the leash, fun games like hide and seek and some [obedience training](#) are all great for this purpose.
- Never **chase, yell, hit or give attention** to your dog when he steals an item - this is the response he wants from you!
- Always **reward desirable behaviour**. If your dog is sitting calmly on his bed while you are preparing your dinner praise and reward him with a tasty treat. This is really an obedience

training exercise so it's ok to give your dog a reward in this situation. When a dog is rewarded, that behaviour is reinforced and is likely to continue in the future (which is what you want in this example).

Strategies To Stop Your Dog From Thieving

Depending on the specific thieving problem you and your dog have you can pick out one or more of these methods to help. Continue to implement the general points listed above and then add one or more of the specific strategies listed below. Good luck - I'm sure you'll get the results you are after.

- 1. Obedience training is the key to preventing and solving most behavioural problems** - including counter surfing and other thieving behaviour. Some basic obedience training will also build respect and strengthen the bond you and your dog share. Try the dog obedience training command "leave it!" to help stop the stealing in its tracks
- 2. Ask for an alternate behaviour from your dog in situations where he may be tempted to steal.** Use a command such as '**On your mat**' or '**on your bed**' and teach them to go to a certain mat that can then be moved to where you want the dog to be. Make this spot the most special and appealing place in the whole house. If you get this one right your dog will spend a lot of time in this spot!

By handling the situation properly, you can more quickly teach your dog to play more appropriate games. Following is a 12 step program, designed to help dogs give up a life of crime:

- 1. Puppy proof- Tidy up so there's less for your pet to steal.
- 2. Move slowly- If you chase your dog, you're in the game. Instead, walk calmly and use assertive body language.
- 3. Do obedience- Basic commands, such as "sit," "down" and "stay" can go a long way to earn your dog's respect.
- 4. Provide toys- In a variety of different textures. If he gets bored with them, rotate them once in a while by keeping some available and some in a cabinet to switch up.
- 5. Make sure the toys are available- If the toys are in the living room but your dog is gated into the kitchen, it's no wonder he's stealing the kitchen towel. Bring them into whatever room your pet is spending time in.
- 6. Correct and replace- When your dog steals something, tell him "Leave it," and replace with a dog toy. (Do not chase him) Praise lavishly when the toy is in his mouth, "Good dog."
- 7. Set him up- Actually practice not stealing stuff. With your dog on leash and the items out of reach, lay out a bunch of items such as socks, remote controls, etc. When your dog looks like he's planning on snatching something, say "leave it!" holding onto the leash so he can't actually get the items. When he stops paying attention to them and looks back at you, praise lavishly and have a game or give them something that they can have.
- 8. Teach self-discipline- Practice obedience commands, particularly the "down/stay" with the items in easy reach. Praise your dog for coexisting with them but not taking them.
- 9. Do not give "people items"- Such as old slippers, children's stuffed animals, etc. To your dog, they smell like "the humans' stuff," and it is almost impossible for them to understand that it's okay to play with the old slippers but not the new.

- 10. Exercise- A tired dog is a good dog. Be sure to give your pet plenty of exercise: physically, through walks and playing, and mentally through obedience training. This will help reduce the urge to create his own activities due to boredom.
- 11. Maintain a sense of humour- After all, a puppy is a puppy and their antics can either make you laugh or drive you insane. Try to keep perspective, do what you have to do to work on it and don't forget to enjoy your dog along the way!

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