

Dealing With Doggie Stealing
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At one time or another, all dog owners have to deal with their dog taking things that they shouldn't have. Whether it's the socks in the dirty laundry, food off the kitchen table, the children's toys or trash from the garbage can, dogs often take things that they shouldn't. How can we deal with such problems? Obviously, preventing the problem is a lot easier than trying to stop an ongoing problem. "Doggie proofing" the areas where Fido is kept is a great help. Keep food, dirty clothes, toys and garbage out of the reach of your dog. This is particularly important if the dog is new to the house, such as a new puppy or older dog who may not know what is appropriate to take and what isn't.

Once Fido has gotten into the habit of taking things, you must first determine why he is taking things. Is he stealing food to eat? Is he raiding the garbage for between meal snacks? Is he taking the kids toys to chew on them or to play with them? Is he grabbing your socks because he knows you will chase him around the house to get them back?

If the stealing seems food-motivated, then you may need to re-evaluate how much and when you are feeding your dog. Your veterinarian can help you determine if you should change the feeding schedule or the amount you are feeding him. Some "chow hounds" will continue to try to steal and eat food no matter how much they are fed. Keeping food and garbage away from them maybe the only reasonable answer. If your dog isn't consuming the objects but just chewing on them, you may want to give him chew toys of his own. Some dogs get bored with the same old chew objects so providing something new can sometimes help. Some dogs steal things as an attention-getting behavior. When Rover grabs your newspaper and takes off with it, with you in hot pursuit, he has just created a rousing game of chase. Even if you yell at him when you catch him and retrieve the paper, the stealing was rewarded by the chase. Once Rover has taken the paper, you can ignore him and not chase him, which will take a lot of the fun out of the game, or you can calmly call Rover to you and ask him to drop the paper. Rewarding him for giving up the paper won't reward the stealing, only giving it up. Teaching your dog to fetch and give up objects is a much better game than chase and may help to stop the stealing for attention.

Owners should be very careful about punishing stealing behavior. If you don't actually catch your dog in the act of grabbing the object, you shouldn't punish him at all. Punishing him after he has taken the object will either make him fearful of you, aggressive to you or very good at hiding his stuff when you are around. If you can catch him in the act of stealing, you need to punish the behavior very consistently to stop it. Using booby traps to startle him when you are not around, or making a loud sound or squirting him with a water bottle may be effective punishment.