



# Stealing

## Help, my dog steals things!

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!

Why do some dogs seem intent on collecting things they shouldn't have? 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 then finds it fantastic fun if their owner immediately gets up and starts chasing them, and then enjoys their owner subsequently wrangling the slipper from their mouth as though they're having a fun game of tug, then the puppy might pick up that slipper – or anything item that gets the same exciting response – in order to enjoy that 'game' again. 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!

## So, what can be done to stop the thief?

### **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** leaflet has some great ideas to keep your dog busy in the right way, such as providing suitable toys and chews, making homemade puzzle feeders or engaging them with some fun training.

### **Make sure the stealing behaviour is not rewarding for the dog – or they might do it again!**

Dogs will do anything that works out well for them – again and again! So, if your dog is enjoying gaining your attention by stealing things the best thing to do when they steal something again 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 and then remove the item when they are distracted. If possible, try to avoid

picking up the item right away as you don't want them to think these things are valuable because you appear to be desperate to have them! The idea is for your dog to learn that stealing is a completely pointless because it doesn't result in any thing fun happening to them as a consequence.

Be prepared that things might get a little worse just 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 previously this behaviour would have resulted in you jumping up and chasing them around the room 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, expecting you to jump up and chase!

**Don't worry – this is part of the learning process!** This might well be a frustrating time for you, but being consistent and no longer giving chase or tugging the items back from your dog and simply ignoring them (again, where safe to do so) will mean that over time and repetition your dog is learning that there is just no point doing this behaviour – but that other good behaviours, such as playing with their own toys, get your attention instead, so they can do those instead because you'll always reward those!

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.

Teach your dog to swap things

This should be something that your dog considers to be **EQUALLY** or **EVEN MORE** valuable! This way your dog can feel comfortable about you taking something they like away, as you're exchanging it for something else they love. For example, if you are taking away a toy, swap it for another favourite toy or very tasty treat!

Give your dog the better item before trying to take what they have away, or drop several pieces of special food onto the ground slightly away from your dog so that they have to leave whatever it is they have in order to go over to eat the treats – then you can calmly pick it 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?

**Interrupt them by creating a distraction**

If your dog has something valuable or is at risk of injuring themselves – they might have picked up a packet of tablets for example - 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, even knocking on it! 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 that you can pop back and remove 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 leaflet 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: [reception@dogstrust.ie](mailto:reception@dogstrust.ie)**

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