

## **TEACHING YOUR DOG TO "DROP IT"**

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"Drop it" is an essential command for dogs to know. Since they investigate the world first with their noses and mouths, they are often inclined to pick up items with the intent of consuming them, gnawing for pleasure, or guarding them from other dogs or people. That means our dogs will often pick up items that are inappropriate for them to have in their mouths. They need to learn what items are appropriate and what items are not, but until they understand that concept, they must know how to spit out an item when we tell them to do so. This is the "drop it" command—it is also essential for games of "fetch."

(NOTE: this command is essential for a dog to know before you play "Tug-O-War" with him. He must release the tug toy as soon as you command it, or that game is off-limits.)

You may have already attempted to teach your dog this, and failed. Why? Well, let's look at it from the dog's perspective:

Fido picks up an item and his human commands him to drop the item. He does so, and what happens? The human takes the precious item, and he doesn't get it back. Well, heck, why did he let go? Now he has nothing! The next time this happens, Fido is going to be much more reluctant to give up his prize, and then a frustrated human will usually try to force him to let go. Now we have a rousing game of tug-o-war going. Whee! What fun for Fido...but not so fun for human.

Lesson learned? DON'T let go—all the fun ends when you do. Pretty soon, the dog learns to "grab and gulp" (food items that fall on or are found on the floor or street) or to "grab and hide" with non-consumable items.

Dogs believe strongly in the concept of "finders, keepers," and this usually works out fine with other dogs. But a dog that picks up contraband items and will not give them up, or swallows them quickly to avoid the human getting them, is a dog that is confused about his place in the "pack" (human family) and this can cause problems in that pack. Not only that, but this behavior can injure or kill the dog if he gets a hold of something dangerous. It can also lead to bites to humans if the dog doesn't think you have the "right" to take the item from him.

So let's fix the problem by teaching the dog to spit out anything he has in his mouth when we say so. (It is a fine idea to teach the dog a good "leave it" command as well so that he doesn't pick up things in the first place.)

1. Put the dog on a leash and find a quiet spot away from distractions. Grab a handful of Yummy Treats (small bits of meat such as hot-dog or chicken—NOT crunchy dog biscuits. Treats HAVE to be irresistible) and one or two of the dog's toys that he will take in his mouth if you offer them.

2. Have a treat in one hand and a toy in the other. Offer the toy to the dog and encourage him to "take it." (Use the leash to keep him from going anywhere with it.) Offer mild resistance for a few seconds (play tug) and then put a Yummy Treat right up next to his nose while telling him to "Drop It."
3. Most dogs cannot resist a treat, and it is highly likely that he will let go of the toy to eat the treat. Praise him as he eats the treat, and pick up the toy again.
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 about four times and then take the toy and the treats and go do something else.

**NOTE: Present the treat JUST BEFORE (or exactly as) you say drop it. NOT after.**

5. PUT THE TOY AWAY until the next session, which can be anywhere from 4 hours to one day hence.
6. After 3 sessions with that toy, pick an item the dog likes to "steal," i.e. a dish towel or sock; or, if he's not a thief by nature, another toy that he doesn't get to play with often. Repeat steps 2 and 3 until the dog is dropping the item quickly and consistently for a treat in several places in the home, and even outside some.
7. Play this game with different items over the next few days, until he is dropping most anything pretty quickly. Now it's time to phase out the treats.
8. At the next session, go back to playing tug with the toy, and after you say "Drop it," and the dog spits it out, give it back to him IMMEDIATELY and play some more. Now, the reward for spitting a toy out is that you get to have it back. By this time, treats should be mostly unnecessary except for occasionally, to keep him interested.
9. The reward for the dog spitting out a contraband item is you throwing a party for him because he's a great dog. Of course, he doesn't get to have that item.