

Stealing & Counter Surfing

Does your dog steal things from countertops or other accessible spaces? While this behavior can be frustrating and even dangerous, your dog has no concept of what we deem “right” and “wrong;” it is our job to teach them. Before you begin training, it’s best to remind yourself that this is normal behavior and your dog is not intentionally “misbehaving.”

Physical management

Management is an important part of any training plan. Unless you are actively in a training session with your dog, they should not have access to items that you don’t want them to take. When you’re not training, countertops should be kept clear if possible, or items should be pushed far enough back that they can’t be reached. If your dog likes to go through the garbage, make sure the cans have lids and are too heavy to tip over. You can also place garbage cans behind a baby gate or in a closet. Crates and pens can also be used to create a safe space for your dog when you’re not able to closely monitor them.



Alternative behaviors:

Setting your dog up to practice alternative behaviors is a powerful technique! Any time you catch your dog trying to steal something from the counter, ask yourself “what else can I give them to do?” Dogs often find items to take and entertain themselves out of boredom. To keep them mentally enriched, try providing a “long-term chew,” such as a filled/frozen Kong, bully stick, or marrow bone. In addition to edible chews, be sure to provide your dog with a variety of dog-safe toys so they have ample opportunity to make appropriate choices. If you don’t currently have these items at home, check out our [online store](#) for a variety of chews and toys to choose from. All proceeds from your sale go straight back to the animals at WHS!

Teaching incompatible behaviors:

Until they’re taught otherwise, dogs believe they should simply jump up and grab something if they want it. It’s our job to teach them more appropriate ways to ask for what they want. Try teaching your dog to sit, then reinforce every “sit” with food. With routine practice, they’ll learn that sitting is the way to ask for food, rather than jumping.

When our dogs do take items:

It is also important to teach our dogs to be comfortable with us taking items away from them. This keeps both you and your dog safe, plus it prevents frustrating games of “keep away” when your dog takes off with something they shouldn’t have. If your dog has possession of an item that you do not want them to have, get a high value treat (like cheese or hot dogs) and trade them for that item. See the [Trade Game handout](#) for more details on how to play this game. Once you have traded for the original item, give them something else that is appropriate for them to play with. This might be a plush toy, a filled Kong, a hard chew, or a bully stick. If you find that there are predictable times of the day where your dog often



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steals items, this may be a sign that they need a routine play session or added enrichment to focus that energy in a more productive way.

These skills, among others, are taught and expanded upon in our dog training classes! Our current class schedule and registration information can be found on our [training webpage](#).

Additional resources:

If you are seeking additional support with your dog contact our Behavior Line at 414-431-6173 or email asktheexperts@wihumane.org.