

Your Smart Dog A Little Give and Take December 2008

Your dog is running through the house, your unmentionables flapping from his mouth, right in front of company. Could it get any worse?! Actually, yes, it could.

Not as embarrassing, but definitely more dangerous: my dog met me at the door gripping a serrated steak knife firmly between his teeth, wagging his entire body. Ghastly thoughts flashed through my mind: a bloody massacre of sliced faces of the other dogs as he charged around exuberantly. Or a veterinary emergency room visit for his shredded gums. (How do you explain that?!) Never before had I realized the importance of a well-taught “Give” cue!

Not only are they easy skills to teach, but “give” and “take” are cornerstones of polite dog behavior. A quick note: you can use any word for “give” (when you want the dog to drop something) and for “take” (when you want the dog to pick up something). In my house, I use “give” and “get it,” but you can use anything that makes sense to you.

Successful trainers teach this skill with a mildly interesting object: generally I use an empty toilet paper or paper towel core. Why? They’re free, recyclable, and won’t hurt your dog. And your dog will probably give it up pretty easily. **In addition to the paper towel core, you also need some *delicious, tiny food treats*** (about the size of a pea). Begin by offering your dog the paper towel core. You may need to make it interesting by sliding it along the floor, whipping it back and forth in front of your dog.

When the dog takes the paper towel core, hang onto it – don’t let it go. You and the dog can hold onto it at the same time. When your dog is

holding the core with you, put that very delicious treat directly on your dog’s nose with your free hand.

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He’ll immediately let go of the boring old paper towel core and take the treat. Good dog! Give him the treat, praise him, *and offer the paper towel core again*, saying “get it” (or whatever your word is). **This part is important.** You want the dog to know that the paper towel core doesn’t disappear – it’s still available to him. Repeat this process 10 – 15 times, always giving your dog the treat and the paper towel core back. In other words, giving up stuff is a really good thing!

Now that your dog is really good at giving up the object, you can begin adding the word “give.” It looks like this:

1. Say “get it” and offer the paper towel core to your dog.
2. When the dog has the core in his mouth, say “Give,” and put the treat on his nose.
3. After he drops the paper towel core, give him the goodie and repeat with step 1.

Note: No need to sound menacing when you say “get it,” or “give.” This is a pleasant exercise, not a threat.

Repeat these steps 10 – 15 times, then *remove the food from the equation until AFTER the dog gives up the paper towel core.* It looks like this:



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1. Say “get it” and offer the paper towel core to your dog.
2. When the dog has the core in his mouth, say “Give,” and *wait for him to drop it*. (Don’t repeat the word, just wait.) Note: No food here.
3. After he drops the paper towel core, *now* give him the goodie, praise him enthusiastically and repeat with step 1.

Always praise your dog for giving up objects. (Even if it’s your half-chewed shoe.)

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

When your dog is really good at giving up the boring paper towel core when you say “give,” (without a treat in your hand) you can then begin working with an object *slightly* more enticing. Be sure to move up only one notch on the exciting scale – not the most important object in your dog’s world.

You can also begin to reward your dog with something other than food for dropping the object. My Labrador *loves* to chase the tennis ball. His reward for dropping the tennis ball is the chance to chase it again! I don’t use food in this instance because, to him, chasing the tennis ball is preferred over food.

You can use a more enticing toy, the opportunity to play with you, or whatever your dog *loves*. **Your dog has to LOVE the alternative**, however, so keep that in mind as you go through these exercises.

FINAL NOTES

Always praise your dog for giving up objects. Even if it’s your half-chewed shoe, your dog deserves praise for giving it up. (If you feel like punishing someone, smack yourself on the head

for leaving the shoe available to your dog in the first place!).

Practice this a lot when you don’t actually need the object back. You’ll have more success if you work with your dog when he’s not already holding your remote control hostage. Just like a football team doesn’t practice a new play in the middle of an important game, nor should you practice getting objects back when it’s critical.

Happy Training! *Note:* If you need help finding a reliable, positive-reinforcement trainer in your area, contact me and I’ll help you search.

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