

Integrative Veterinary Care

Trade for Treat

Brenda G. Mills, DVM

Also known as “give”. This exercise teaches your puppy several important things: 1) that if he gives you something valuable, he gets something in return; 2) when he gives something up to you, he doesn't necessarily lose it forever; 3) whatever the treat or toy is, he doesn't need to protect it from you.

This is, perhaps, the simplest thing you can teach your dog. Start while your pup has something really cool, like a rawhide, and is chewing it intently. Take a piece of really yummy food and put it in front of his nose. When he takes the treat, you take the chew toy. Hold it for a 5 count, then give it back. Do this repeatedly throughout the day when you see your pup with a prized possession. Begin attaching the command “Give” to this process immediately before offering the treat once your pup is readily releasing his prize when the treat is offered.

Once your pup is comfortable with giving up the toy for the treat and getting it back, start substituting another toy for the one you took, or doing something else your pup really likes, like going for a walk, occasionally after giving the treat and taking the toy.

Every member of the household should be able to trade for a treat (very small children excepted).

The same process is used to get a pup to give up the tug toy when playing tug games. Bring the treat to the pup's nose while holding the toy still, tell him how great he is when he lets go and let him have the food, then give the toy back and/or start the game again. Tug games are OK as long as your pup isn't prone to excessive hand biting during play and you can end the game (by getting the toy) whenever you want to.

The same process works for getting a puppy to give back the ball while retrieving – trade the ball for a treat and repeat the game. It is a good idea to end retrieve games by telling your dog “Last throw” when you're ready to quit, throw one more time, and either do something else fun or let him keep the ball for a bit after the last throw.

The trade can be used to recover your personal, non-chew-toy possessions from your puppy. Get your puppy's attention, show him the treat, and ask for the give. This process is much simpler and more successful than the time-honored tradition of playing a very exciting and fun game of chase to rescue clothing from your dog's mouth when you're trying to get dressed.

If you are having problems with this exercise, if your pup growls or seems angry when you take the toy in exchange for a treat, please contact our office for assistance. Private work with a trainer who uses positive reinforcement may be in order. Food and toy guarding are potentially dangerous behaviors, and we need to teach the dog at an early age that guarding possessions from people is not necessary. This is not a problem that can be dealt with by punishments or reprimands, since the pup will perceive the punishment or reprimand as aggression on the person's part and will escalate his own aggression in response.