

Teaching Your Dog to “Drop it”

Definition:

"Drop whatever is in your mouth, and I'll give you something even better!"

Practical uses:

“Drop it” is useful when your dog picks up something in his mouth that he shouldn’t have – your shoe, your child’s favorite toy, or a chicken bone, for example. It’s also useful for those dogs that grab the leash in their mouths when being walked and for those mouthy dogs that want to grab at your hands, arms and clothing in play.

Many dogs learn that when their owner is yelling “drop it” they are going to be deprived of the goodie they have in their mouths, so they will gulp it down faster. It is imperative that, to your dog, this command means he has a chance to get something even better, so he will willingly let go of the forbidden object. This could even mean the difference between life and death for your dog.

How to teach:

Give your dog a toy or chewie. You want to start with something your dog is interested in having in his mouth, but not a really high-value item that he is not going to want to give up. Wait for him to drop the item and, when he does, click and treat (C/T), and pick up the item. You may want to throw the treat a few feet away so he is busy getting the treat and doesn’t try to grab for the item at the same time you do. Give the item back to the dog and repeat 10-12 times.

Adding the cue:

Begin saying your cue word, “drop it,” *as the dog drops the toy*. Continue for two to three more sessions of 10-12 C/Ts. In your next session, use the “drop it” cue just before the dog drops the item. C/T when the dog drops the item.

Moving On:

- Once your dog is performing the behavior on cue, you can start using a higher value item -- for some dogs that might be a raw hide, a tennis ball, or a bone.
- For dogs that love to play fetch, the reward for “drop it” can be throwing the ball or toy.
- Variable Schedule of Reinforcement – you have been using a “continuous schedule of reinforcement” which means the dog gets a treat every time he performs the behavior. Now you’re ready to move to a variable schedule of reinforcement, meaning he only gets a treat sometimes. Only C/T every third, sixth, second, fourth, or tenth time he performs the behavior. Do, however, return the item to the dog every time (except the last time when you end the session — make sure he gets a C/T for that one!).
- Once your dog is performing the behavior reliably on cue (i.e., he will do the behavior at least 90% of the time when you give the verbal cue) on a variable schedule of reinforcement, you don’t really need the clicker any more for this behavior. You should still reward your dog often and variably with praise and a food treat, but you don’t need the clicker any more -- until you’re ready to teach a new behavior!