

Teaching a dog to fetch and drop objects on command

“Fetch” and “Drop it” are excellent commands to teach a young dog. Fetch is a great game that most dogs love. It is mentally stimulating, wonderful for wearing the pet out, an acceptable type of play for children and dogs, and can provide a means for social interaction between visitors and shy dogs. Teaching the pet to drop things on command reinforces the idea that the owner has control over the dog, and comes in handy when the pet has something in its mouth that it shouldn't.

Teaching fetch

Pick a time when the pet is in an energetic mood and there are few distractions. Toss an interesting toy a short distance. As the pet picks it up and turns to look at you, lower your body, take several quick steps in the opposite direction, wave your hand and wiggle your fingers in an animated way, and say “Fetch” in a very upbeat tone. This should catch the attention of the pet and prompt it to come toward you. Continue to repeat “Fetch” as the pet approaches.

If the pet runs the other way with the toy, lies down and chews it, or does not come all the way up to you, simply walk away and end the play session. You must avoid chasing after the pet, walking toward it to take the toy, or attempting to coax the pet to return.

Drop it – first step

The first step involves luring the pet to drop the toy and teaching a cue word. As the pet approaches with the toy, place a piece of food between your forefinger and thumb. When the pet reaches you, move your hand and the food toward the pet's mouth with a bit of a flourish. Hold the food in front of the mouth without saying anything. When the pet opens its mouth to take the food, the toy will fall out. As this is happening, say the cue words, “Drop it,” and pick up the toy with the other hand as you allow the pet to take the food.

Repeat until you notice that the pet is starting to drop the toy as your hand just begins the downward movement toward it.

Use a small piece of food that is more interesting than the toy, but not so interesting that the pet will forget the toy and only focus on the food. Each time the pet takes the food from your hand, say “Good dog.” If the pet is not interested in food, you can use a second toy in place of food to lure it to drop the fetched toy.

Drop it – second step

The next step is to turn the cue words into a command. Instead of putting the food in front of the pet's mouth and waiting until it opens to say “Drop it,” say “Drop it” as you begin to swing your hand down toward the pet. Pick up the toy, give the food, and say “Good dog.” Repeat this at least 12 times before advancing to the next step.

Drop it – third step

The last step involves gradually phasing out the food. Hold your hand like you have food in it, swing it down toward the pet, and say “Drop it.” When the pet drops it, say “Good dog” and give it loads of praise. As you continue to practice, alternate between a food reward and praise, but vary the ratio of praise rewards to food rewards so the pet doesn't know exactly which reward it will get each time it drops the toy. As the training progresses, you should be using more praise and less food. When combining the drop and fetch exercises, your dog may also learn that by dropping the toy, it gets the opportunity to chase and fetch it again. End the session on a positive note with your dog dropping the toy and getting a final reward.

Give it

If you prefer to have a “Give” command, you would proceed exactly as with “Drop it,” but in each case you would place your second hand under or on the toy and reward the dog when the toy is released into your hand.

Having problems?

If the dog will not drop the toy, you can first increase the value of the lure while using a toy to fetch that is of less interest to the dog.

Another method for teaching drop is to watch the puppy closely without interacting any further until it eventually drops the toy or object it is carrying. As soon as the toy is dropped, say “Drop it” and call the pet over for a high-level reward. The use of clicker training can be particularly effective to mark and capture the “drop” behavior. After a few sessions try and anticipate when the pet is about to drop the toy, say “Drop” just in advance and reward immediately with “Good drop” or a click and food reward.

Drop it – other items

Once the pet learns the “Drop it” command during play, the command can be used whenever it has anything in its mouth. The transition from dropping toys during fetch to dropping more desirable items, like raw hide or food wrappers, should be made very gradually. Rank the pet's toys from the least desirable to most desirable.

When you notice that the pet has the least desirable toy in its mouth, ask it to drop it using a command and hand signal. Praise it or give a small food reward, then ask it to sit and return the toy to the pet. When you find that it drops that toy readily, move to the next toy in the rank, and so forth. Be sure always to use an upbeat tone of voice and make the training fun. Practice is very important. The pet needs to drop something on command at least several times each day if you expect to be able to get to the point where it will drop special items like food wrappers and dead birds on command.