

## Counter Surfing

Although dogs are hunters by nature, they are also scavengers so if opportunity presents itself a dog will take advantage. Because dogs have an exceptional sense of smell, they'll be drawn to the aroma of food left out on the counter. It's not a bad dog that steals food from the counter – it's a normal dog. It's not a good dog that doesn't steal your food – it's a trained dog. It's not fair to punish a dog for doing what comes naturally to its species. If you saw a \$100 bill lying on the ground would you not pick it up?

Your job is to control the environment to set your dog up for success and teach incompatible behaviour to its natural instinct to take food when it's available. All it takes is one reward for this behaviour to become deeply rooted because dogs remember.

Even if your dog is only rewarded occasionally the behaviour will become stronger because of the slot machine affect. Slot machines are programmed by psychologists to reward the player only often enough to keep him or her pulling the lever. This is because it has been scientifically proven that intermittent rewards increase behaviour. If you find a \$100 bill outside your door would you not check next time you went outside? Imagine you found one two weeks later. Would that not reinforce the behaviour?

If you punish your dog when you catch it, yet leave opportunity when you're not watching, you'll end up creating an owner-absent problem. Your dog will learn that it's dangerous to steal food when you're around but quite safe and rewarding to do so when you're not looking. Because dogs live in the moment, punishing the dog after the fact only teaches it one thing – you can't be trusted. Punishment jeopardizes your dog's temperament and your all-important trust bond.

- Keep your counters clear of food and other objects that your dog may be interested in.
- Supervise during meal times and whenever food or other objects are left out on the counter.
- One option is to train your dog that the kitchen is your territory and out of bounds. Block off your dog's access to the kitchen when you can't supervise and leave a leash on when you can. If your dog enters the kitchen simply pick up the end of the leash and give the instruction "out" while walking your dog out of the kitchen. Repeat until your dog no longer attempts to enter the kitchen.

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- Another option is to give your dog something else to do when you're working in the kitchen or enjoying your meal. Teach your dog to "go to your mat" and chew on a stuffed Kong or hollow bone during this time. See "*Go To Your Mat*" in the Relaxation Exercises handout and the "*Chew Options*" handout.
- Passive training means that you control the environment to prevent your dog from ever being rewarded for counter surfing. If the behaviour is never rewarded the behaviour will fade to extinction.
- If you catch your dog sniffing around the counter give your "off" or "leave it" cue and redirect your dog to another area.

The treatment for counter surfing is all about prevention – environmental management and teaching alternative behaviours. Consistency is the key!

