

PupShelf

THE FOOD OBSESSION FIX

**Stop the counter-surfing,
the trash raids, and the begging**



Topics Included

1 Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)

2 Why "No" and Bigger Meals Don't Work

3 The Five Games

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Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)



The ten-second window

You turn around to grab a spoon. Ten seconds, maybe less. You turn back and the chicken breast that was resting on the cutting board is gone, and so is the dog – already three rooms away, eating fast, tail going.

Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)

You didn't hear a sound. No claws scrabbling, no dish rattling. Just gone.

If this is a weekly event in your house, you have probably already tried the obvious fixes. Bigger meals, so the dog isn't "so hungry." A stern "NO" the second you catch it. Keeping the dog out of the kitchen entirely. Maybe all three, in rotation, for months.

And the counter surfing is exactly as reliable as it was on day one.

That's not because you're inconsistent, or because your dog is uniquely badly behaved. It's because every one of those fixes was built for a different dog than the one you have – and this chapter is about understanding which dog you actually have, because it changes everything else in this book.



Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)

The advice that's built for a different dog

Search “stop dog counter surfing” and almost everything you’ll find traces back to the same underlying assumption: the dog is stealing food because it’s hungry. Feed it more. Feed it more often. Add fiber so it feels fuller for longer. Switch to a higher-calorie food so smaller portions satisfy it.

That advice isn’t wrong. It’s just answering a question your dog isn’t asking.

It comes from real, well-documented research – mostly on Labrador Retrievers, the breed used in the biggest genetic studies of canine appetite. A significant number of Labradors, and their close cousin the Flat-Coated Retriever, carry a mutation in a gene called POMC, which plays a direct role in the brain’s “I’ve had enough” signal. Dogs with this mutation are not being naughty or manipulative when they beg, scavenge, and inhale their dinner in four seconds flat. They are, at a hormonal level, hungrier than other dogs, more or less constantly. For that dog, more food genuinely helps, because the problem really is appetite.

Here’s the part that matters for your specific dog: in the same peer-reviewed genetics research, scientists tested for that exact mutation in Golden Retrievers too – directly, not by assumption – and it isn’t there. Neither of your dog’s two parent breeds is carrying a broken “I’ve had enough” switch. So if your Goldendoodle is food-obsessed, hormonal hunger isn’t why, which means “just feed more” was always going to miss, but not for the reason people usually assume.

Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)

What Golden Retrievers do carry, bred in on purpose over generations, is something that looks similar from the outside but works completely differently underneath: they were developed as Gundogs to retrieve food-adjacent game gently and persistently, which selected hard for biddability and food motivation as trainability traits, not for a broken appetite switch. A working retriever line was bred to keep checking in with a person. That's a real, useful drive – not a genetic excuse – and it's also exactly the trait that makes counter-surfing easy for a Golden-cross to pick up fast.

Your dog's other parent breed doesn't carry any version of that story either, from either direction. Poodles were never selected for a broken satiety switch – they were selected for something almost the opposite: independent problem-solving. A Poodle line was bred to notice things, test things, and remember what worked, often without any person involved at all.

That difference is the whole chapter.

Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)



What's actually happening on the counter

Here's the mechanism, and once you see it you won't be able to unsee it.

Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)

The first time your dog got food off a counter, it wasn't executing a plan. It was almost certainly an accident of timing – a pizza box left too close to the edge, a toddler's plate at nose height, a moment nobody was watching. The dog didn't "decide" to steal. It found something, and the something was extraordinary.

But a Poodle-brained dog doesn't file that away as luck. It files it away as **data**. *Counters sometimes produce food. Counters are worth checking.* And because the payoff – a piece of steak, a stick of butter, an entire loaf of bread – is enormous compared to a piece of kibble, that one data point is powerful enough to outweigh a hundred boring trips to the counter that produced nothing.

This is why the behavior looks so deliberate. Because it is. Your dog isn't hungry when it checks the counter for the fortieth time this week with a full bowl sitting on the floor six feet (1.8 m) away. It's running a search it has good reason to believe pays off eventually. A hungrier dog would eat the kibble in front of it first. A bored problem-solver checks the counter instead.

Feed a genuinely hungry dog more food, and the scavenging usually drops, because you've answered the actual question. Feed a Poodle-brained dog more food, and the counter-checking barely changes – because you never answered the question it was actually asking, which was never "am I full?" It was "is there anything interesting up there today?"

Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)

The tell that confirms it

You can usually confirm which dog you have without any special test, just by watching what happens after a theft.

A hunger-driven dog eats whatever it finds – kibble, toast crusts, a dropped carrot – with the same flat urgency, because the point is calories. A problem-solver is a **specialist**. It walks past the dry dog food entirely on its way to the one item on the counter that's actually worth the trip: the roast, the butter dish, the sandwich. It also tends to look, in the exact moment after the theft, unmistakably pleased with itself – head up, tail loose and wagging, eating slowly enough to enjoy it, rather than gulping in a panic. That is not the face of a starving animal. That is the face of a dog that just won something.

If that description matches your dog, you are not dealing with hunger. You're dealing with a very smart animal that has, through no fault of its own, discovered a game it's currently winning. The good news is that a game can be changed. You cannot argue a dog out of hunger, but you absolutely can change the rules of a game – and that's what the rest of this book does.

What to take from this chapter

Why Your Dog Steals Food (And It Isn't Hungry)

1. Your dog's food obsession is very unlikely to be a hunger problem – that mechanism belongs to a different breed entirely, and treating it like one is why the standard advice hasn't worked.
2. The behavior is driven by problem-solving, not appetite. One enormous, memorable payoff can outweigh months of an empty counter.
3. The fix isn't more food, and it isn't more shouting. It's removing the payoff for checking, and giving the problem-solving drive somewhere better to go – which is exactly what Chapters 3 and 4 build for you.
4. Watch what your dog does the instant after a theft. A relaxed, pleased dog eating slowly is confirmation, not just a funny anecdote.

Chapter 2 looks at why the fixes almost everyone reaches for first – bigger meals, a sharper “no,” a closed door – quietly fail against this particular dog, before we get to what actually works.

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Why



Four fixes everyone tries first

Before we get to what does work, it's worth being honest about why the obvious things don't – because if you've tried them and failed, the problem was never your effort. It was the target.

Why

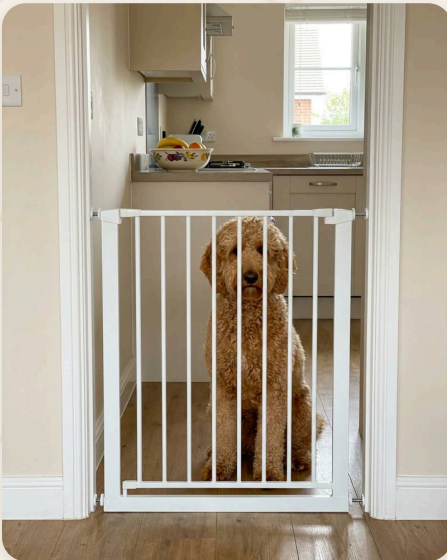
Fix one: feed more. Chapter 1 covered why this misses – a problem-solving dog isn't checking the counter because its bowl is empty. Bigger portions can even make things slightly worse, because a dog that's used to abundant food from its bowl and abundant food from the counter has simply learned that food shows up everywhere, all the time, which is not the lesson you were going for.

Fix two: catch it and say “no.” This is the one that feels like it should work, and it's worth understanding exactly why it doesn't. By the time you see the theft happening, the dog has usually already got the food in its mouth – which means the reward has already landed. Shouting after the reward doesn't erase the reward; it just adds a slightly unpleasant noise a half-second afterward, which a fast eater can easily outrun. What the dog actually learns from repeated telling-off isn't *don't take food from the counter*. It's *finish faster, and check whether the human is watching before you try*. You haven't stopped the behavior. You've trained it to get quieter and quicker, which is the opposite of progress.

Fix three: manage the space. Baby gates across the kitchen, keeping the dog in another room during meal prep, never leaving anything unattended. This one isn't wrong, exactly – it's incomplete. Management prevents the behavior from happening, but it doesn't change what the dog would do the moment the gate comes down, because nothing about its decision-making has shifted. The instant a guest leaves the gate open, or you're too tired one evening to close it, you find out nothing was ever actually fixed – only postponed. You'll still need management. It's just not the whole plan.

Why

Fix four: “he knows he did wrong.” The guilty look – ears back, head low, avoiding eye contact – is one of the most misread signals in dog behavior. It isn’t remorse or an admission of guilt about a past event. It’s an appeasement response to *your* body language and tone right now, in this second – a dog reading that you’re upset and trying to defuse it. Dogs that have never touched a crumb will make exactly the same face if you walk in scowling. It tells you nothing about what the dog will do differently next time, because it was never a statement about the theft. It was a statement about your face.



The trap in all four

Why

Notice what these four have in common: every single one of them happens either *before* the dog has decided to check the counter, or *after* it has already succeeded. None of them are present in the one moment that actually matters – the split second the dog is standing in front of the counter, deciding whether checking is worth it this time.

That's the moment this book targets. Not more food in the bowl an hour earlier. Not a louder voice thirty seconds too late. The decision point itself.

The two things that actually move the needle

Real, lasting change here comes from doing two things at once, not one or the other.

First: close the loophole. Every accidental win – a plate left within reach, an unattended cutting board, a guest who slips the dog a chip under the table – is a full recharge of the exact belief you're trying to dismantle. One jackpot can undo two weeks of consistent practice, because to a problem-solving brain, *it worked once recently* outweighs *it usually doesn't work*. This is why the games in Chapter 3 always pair training with a short management step. Management isn't a separate, lesser strategy here – it's half of the actual fix, because training can't outrun a genuine jackpot.

Why

Second: give the drive somewhere else to go. You cannot switch off a dog's need to problem-solve for food, and trying to suppress it with correction alone tends to produce a sneakier dog rather than a calmer one. What works is redirecting that exact drive onto something you set up on purpose – a puzzle feeder, a scatter search, a snuffle mat – so the dog's daily need to “solve something and get paid” is met on your terms, at a time you chose, before it ever gets around to auditioning the counter.

Do both, consistently, for a few weeks, and you're not fighting the dog's nature anymore. You're using it.

One honest caveat belongs here, especially if your dog has been successfully raiding the counter for months or years already: treat this as an update, not a wipe. Certified trainers who work with long-standing counter-surfers describe the old response as something that gets overlaid by the new one, not deleted outright – the dog doesn't forget that counters can pay off, it just stops finding that worth checking on, day after uneventful day. That's why the habits in this book are worth keeping as a permanent part of how your kitchen runs rather than a program you finish and move past. A dog that hasn't checked the counter in six months can still remember how, the moment a genuine jackpot turns up.

What to take from this chapter

Why

1. Bigger meals, delayed scolding, and management alone all fail for the same reason: none of them touch the actual decision-making moment.
2. The guilty look is appeasement, not evidence the dog understands the crime. Don't build a training plan around it.
3. Real change needs two things running together: no more accidental jackpots, and a legitimate outlet for the problem-solving drive that's causing this in the first place.
4. One good management slip can undo weeks of training. Treat management as part of the plan, not a fallback for when the plan fails.
5. Expect an update, not a wipe – the old response gets overlaid by the new one rather than erased, so the management habits here are a permanent part of the routine, not a phase you graduate out of.

Chapter 3 is where that plan lives – five specific games, each targeting a different piece of this puzzle, each with a plain-language goal so you know exactly what “working” looks like.

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The Five Games



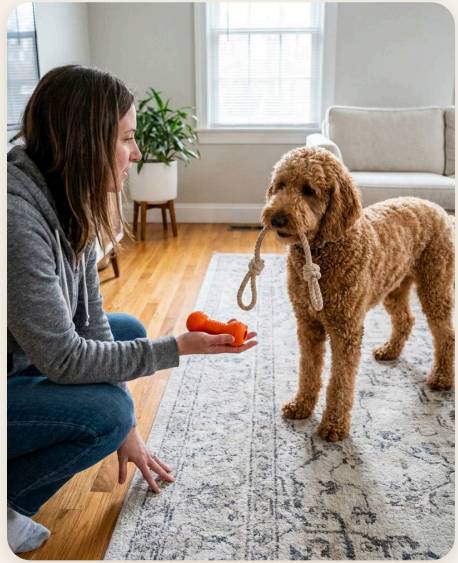
How to use this chapter

Each of these five games targets one specific piece of the food-obsession puzzle – the counter check, the trash raid, the floor grab, the table beg, and the underlying drive behind all four. Run them in order if this is new territory; skip straight to the one that matches your worst habit if it isn't.

The Five Games

None of these need special equipment beyond things most households already own – a treat pouch, a mat, a couple of food puzzles. None of them involve raising your voice. All five work the same way this whole book works: remove the payoff for the behavior you don't want, and hand out payoffs generously for the behavior you do.

Run each game in short sessions – three to five minutes, once or twice a day – rather than one long marathon. A tired, distracted dog learns slower than a fresh one, and five focused minutes beats twenty scattered ones every time.



The Five Games

Game 1 – The Boring Counter

This is the foundation everything else sits on, and it's also the one people skip because it looks almost too simple to work. It works precisely because it's simple: you're not teaching a new skill, you're erasing an old piece of data.

What you need: a treat pouch, and roughly a week where nothing edible is ever left within reach of the counter edge, not even for ten seconds.

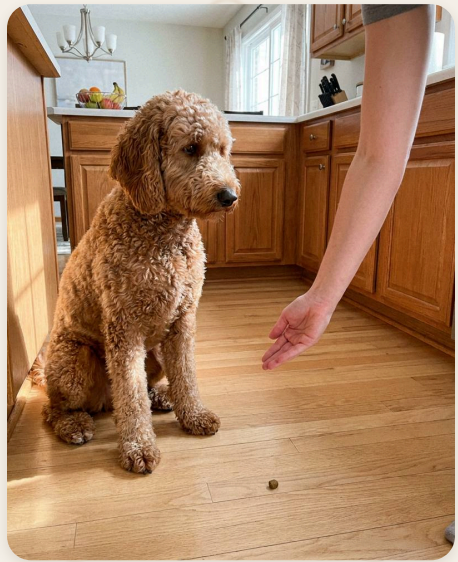
How to run it:

1. For the first week, treat every counter as a vault. Nothing goes near the edge unattended – not the cutting board, not a mug, not a bag of chips on its way from the car. This is the “close the loophole” half from Chapter 2, and it's non-negotiable for this game to work.
2. Several times a day, casually prepare food at the counter as normal. The instant your dog approaches and simply *looks* at the counter without jumping up, mark the moment with a calm word like “yes” and drop a treat on the floor, away from the counter.
3. Over the following days, raise the bar slightly: reward only when the dog glances at the counter and then looks back at you, rather than lingering on the counter itself.
4. If the dog puts paws up regardless, don't shout – simply turn your back to the counter and wait, unmoving and silent, until all four paws are back on the floor, then reward that instant.

The Five Games

Goal: the dog stops checking the counter, because checking hasn't produced anything – good or bad – for weeks.

The absence of any payoff, good or bad, is what makes the counter boring. A punished counter is still an interesting counter. An irrelevant one is the one that finally stops getting checked.



Game 2 – The Trash Trade

The Five Games

Raiding the trash can is the same search behavior as counter surfing, aimed at a different container. Locking the can away solves the immediate mess but does nothing for the moment your dog finds something interesting on a walk or under a table. This game builds a reliable “bring it to me” instead.

Trash carries a risk plain counter food usually doesn't: food that's been sitting and spoiling can grow mycotoxins, and mycotoxin poisoning causes tremors and seizures, not just an upset stomach – this trash is worth treating as genuinely higher-stakes than a stray sandwich crust, not just messier. Most households also only think to secure the kitchen trash can, but the outdoor can on trash day is a second exposure window people forget entirely – a full bag sitting at nose height for hours is exactly the kind of accidental jackpot that can undo weeks of the training below. Secure both, not just the one indoors.

What you need: two toys or chews of clearly different value – one your dog likes, one your dog loves – and a stash of high-value treats.

How to run it:

The Five Games

1. Start with the lower-value item. Let your dog pick it up, then calmly show the higher-value item without reaching for the one in its mouth.
2. The moment your dog drops the first item to investigate the better one, say a release word like “drop,” hand over the better item immediately, and let your dog enjoy it fully – no snatching it straight back.
3. Pick the dropped item up only once your dog is absorbed in the trade item, not before.
4. Practice this daily with safe household objects until it’s automatic, then it will transfer naturally the day your dog actually finds something off the counter or out of the trash.

Goal: the dog brings you what it found instead of gulping it down, because the trade has paid off every single time it’s been tried.

Never chase, and never grab an item out of your dog’s mouth.

Both teach the opposite lesson – that a human closing in means the good thing is about to be taken away for nothing in return, which makes a dog swallow faster next time, not slower.

The Five Games

This is worth more than good manners. A dog that reliably trades instead of gulping is a dog you can actually get a genuinely dangerous item away from – chocolate, grapes, onion, a cooked bone – before it's swallowed. Practiced on ordinary household objects now, this exchange is a real poison-prevention habit for the day it matters, not just a training nicety.



Game 3 – The Floor Is Not a Buffet

Dropped food is the easiest jackpot in the house, because it requires no counter-checking at all – it just falls. This game builds the pause that keeps a dropped grape, a fallen pill, or a spilled plate of food from becoming an automatic win.

The Five Games

What you need: a handful of low-value kibble and a handful of high-value treats, kept separate.

How to run it:

1. With your dog watching, drop a single piece of low-value kibble on the floor and immediately cover it with your foot or hand before your dog can reach it.
2. Wait for even a half-second of hesitation or eye contact back to you, then uncover the food and let your dog have it as the reward for waiting.
3. Repeat until your dog reliably pauses and checks in with you the instant something hits the floor, rather than diving for it.
4. Once that's solid, upgrade to a higher-value item to prove the rule holds even when the temptation is bigger.

Goal: the dog waits for a beat before going for dropped food, instead of lunging the instant it hits the floor.

That half-second pause is the whole game. It's the same gap that, once built, gives you time to say "leave it" before a grape or an onion ring ever reaches a mouth.

The Five Games



Game 4 – The Empty Hand Game

Begging at the table survives because it works, at least occasionally – a soft-hearted guest, a distracted parent, one dropped fry, and the whole behavior is worth maintaining for weeks. This game removes the payoff from the table entirely and moves it somewhere else.

What you need: a specific mat or dog bed, and a house-wide agreement that nobody feeds the dog from the table, ever – one exception undoes this faster than almost anything else in the book.

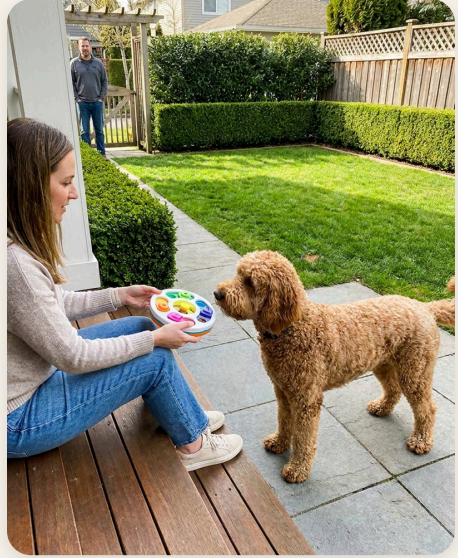
How to run it:

The Five Games

1. Before you sit down to eat, send your dog to its mat with a cue like “place,” and reward generously for lying down there – this part happens away from the table entirely.
2. During the first few meals, get up occasionally to deliver a treat to the mat while your dog stays on it, so lying on the mat during a meal is clearly the better-paying option.
3. If your dog leaves the mat to come begging, calmly walk it back and reset, without talking to it or making eye contact along the way – the walk-back itself should be uneventful, not a scene.
4. Gradually stretch the time between mat rewards across several meals, until your dog settles there for the whole meal without any table-side payoff at all.

Goal: the dog goes to its own spot during meals, because a fed table gets nothing, but a settled mat still gets paid – just never at the table itself.

The Five Games



Game 5 – The Puzzle Payout

This is the one that addresses the actual cause, not just the symptoms. A dog built to solve problems for food needs a real problem to solve – and if you don't provide one, the counter will keep volunteering.

What you need: two or three food puzzles in rotation – a snuffle mat, a treat-dispensing ball, a muffin tin with balls covering hidden treats – so the same puzzle doesn't go stale.

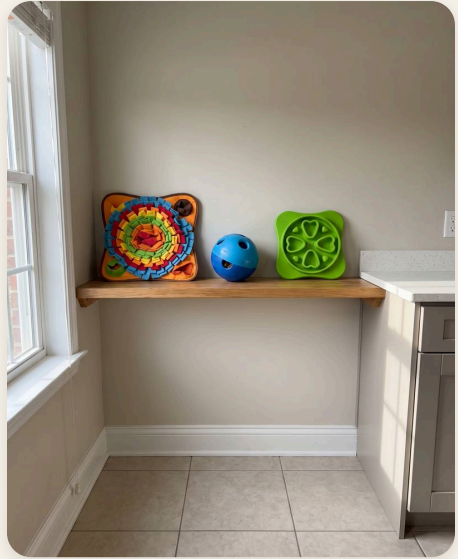
How to run it:

The Five Games

1. Set aside part of your dog's daily food – not extra calories, the same total amount – to be delivered exclusively through a puzzle rather than a bowl.
2. Deliver one puzzle session before the times your dog is most likely to go looking for trouble on its own – typically while you're cooking or right after you sit down to eat.
3. Rotate which puzzle you use every few days. A problem-solving brain gets bored of a solved puzzle exactly as fast as it gets bored of an empty counter.
4. Treat this as daily maintenance, not a one-off fix. A dog that gets its puzzle time consistently has far less reason to go looking for an unauthorized one.

Goal: the dog's daily need to solve something for food is met on your schedule, before it goes looking for a schedule of its own.

The Five Games



What to take from this chapter

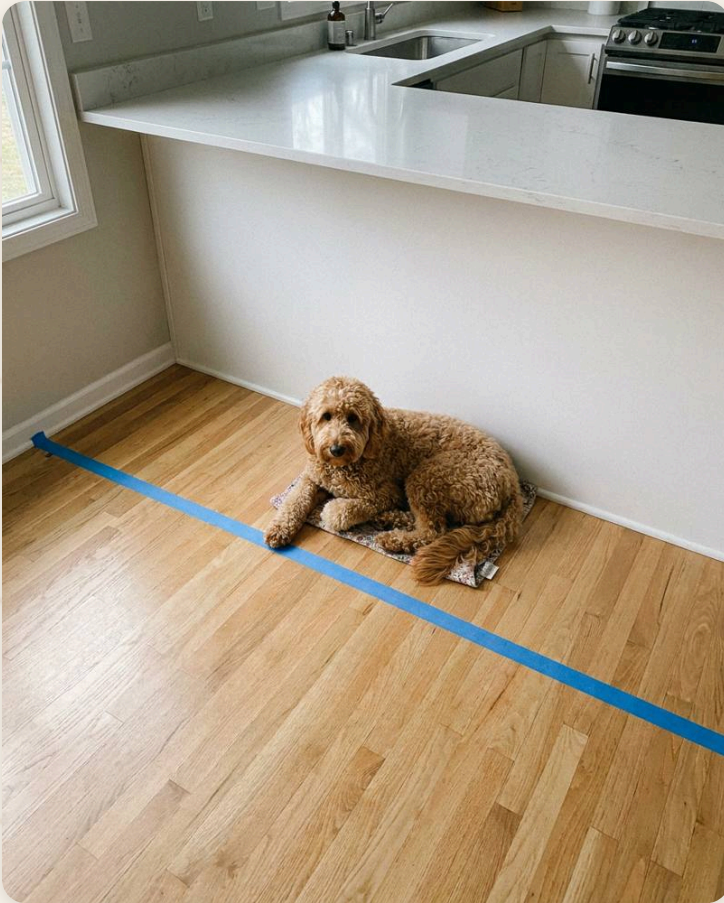
1. Each game targets a specific moment – the check, the find, the drop, the beg, or the underlying drive – not the dog's character in general.
2. All five rely on removing the payoff for the behavior you don't want and reliably paying for the one you do, never on volume of correction.
3. Consistency across every person in the house matters more than any single technique. One soft exception can undo a week of practice.
4. Game 5 is the one that keeps the other four working long-term – it gives the drive an outlet so it stops auditioning your kitchen.

The Five Games

Chapter 4 covers two simple setups worth building once – a kitchen boundary and a repeatable trade sequence – that make Games 1 and 2 easier to run consistently, every single time, without having to think about it.

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Set the Kitchen Up to Win



Why a picture helps here

Games 1 and 2 both depend on doing the same small thing correctly, every single time, without having to think it through mid-moment. That's much easier with a fixed picture in your head than with a paragraph of instructions you half-remember while your hands are full of groceries.

Set the Kitchen Up to Win



The boundary that makes the counter boring

Game 1 works because checking the counter stops producing anything at all – not even attention. That only holds up if the boundary between “counter zone” and “everywhere else” is the same distance, every time, for every person in the house. A boundary that moves depending on who’s cooking is not a boundary; it’s a coin flip your dog will keep testing.

Set the Kitchen Up to Win

Pick a real, visible line – the edge of a rug, a line of floor tile, a piece of tape for the first week if you need one – roughly a stride back from the counter, and treat anything past it as “the zone where nothing has ever happened.” Reward calmly from behind that line. If paws land past it, simply stop what you’re doing and wait it out in silence rather than reacting; reacting is itself a kind of attention, and attention is exactly the payoff you’re trying to remove.

Set the Kitchen Up to Win



The trade sequence that never fails

Game 2 falls apart the moment a trade doesn't pay off – one grabbed item, one chase down the hallway, and your dog has just learned that trading is a trick. The sequence has to run the same three beats every time: your dog has something, you offer something better, the better thing arrives before you touch the first thing at all.

Set the Kitchen Up to Win

The order matters more than the items do. Offering the trade first and only reaching for the original item once your dog is already absorbed in the new one is what keeps this a trade instead of a negotiation your dog can lose.

Putting both to work together

These two setups cover the two most common entry points for a food obsession problem – the counter itself, and whatever your dog finds and carries off. Between them and the puzzle rotation from Game 5, most of a typical week's opportunities are already accounted for before they happen, which is exactly the point: the less often your dog gets to practice the old behavior, the faster the new one sticks.

Certified trainers boil the whole management side down to one rule worth keeping in your head: your dog should only ever be in one of three states – crated, on its place/mat, or under your direct, active supervision. Anything outside those three is loose-and-unsupervised, which is exactly the fourth option this book is built to close off.

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The One-Page Checklist



Print this page

Everything in Chapters 3 and 4 boils down to a short list of habits. Stick this page on the fridge for the first month – most relapses happen because one small step got skipped for a week, not because the training stopped working.

The One-Page Checklist

Before you start cooking or eating

- ☐ Nothing edible sits within reach of the counter edge – not “just for a second.”
- ☐ The dog’s mat or bed is somewhere it can see you from, not shut away in another room.
- ☐ A few pieces of puzzle-ready food are set aside from the day’s total, not extra on top of it.

Every time you leave the kitchen, even briefly

- ☐ Cutting boards, plates, and bags go behind the counter zone, not on the edge closest to the room.
- ☐ The trash can lid is closed, or the dog is on the far side of a gate – whichever you actually have set up.
- ☐ Nobody in the house is holding food at dog nose-height while talking to someone else.

The One-Page Checklist



The instant a theft happens anyway

- ☐ No shouting, no chasing, no grabbing at the mouth.
- ☐ Offer the trade from Game 2 immediately, calmly, with something better.

The One-Page Checklist

- Once it's over, quietly find and close whatever loophole let it happen – a jackpot review, not a blame review.

Once a week

- Rotate which food puzzle is in use, so it stays interesting.
- Check in with everyone in the house: has anyone slipped the dog food from the table this week? One honest “yes” explains a whole week of backsliding.

One flag that means stop and get help

- If your dog stiffens, freezes, growls, or snaps when you approach it near food or a stolen item – stop using any game in this book that involves taking something back, and read Chapter 7 before doing anything else.

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Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask



"Is my dog just greedy, or is this a Poodle thing?"

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

Almost always the second one. Greed, in the sense of raw hunger, tends to show up as a dog that eats everything indiscriminately and fast. A Poodle-brained problem-solver is choosier than that – it walks past the kibble on its way to the one interesting item on the counter. If that description fits, you’re dealing with Chapter 1’s mechanism, not appetite.

“My dog only steals from the counter, never begs at the table – is that the same problem?”

Same underlying drive, different opportunity. The counter is a puzzle your dog solves alone; begging is a puzzle it solves by working a person. Game 1 handles the counter specifically. If table begging shows up later, Game 4 is built for exactly that, and you can run it on its own without redoing everything else.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask



"Will feeding my dog more food stop the counter surfing?"

No, and this is worth being direct about, because it's the single most common thing owners try first. More food answers a hunger question your dog isn't asking. It can even make things slightly worse by teaching your dog that food shows up in more places than it used to. Keep portions where your vet recommends them and focus on Chapter 3 instead.

"My dog does the 'guilty look' right after – doesn't that mean it knows it did something wrong?"

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

It means your dog is reading your tone and body language in that moment, not confessing to a memory of the theft. Dogs make the same face when scolded for something they didn't do. It's a useful signal that your dog is upset by your reaction, but it tells you nothing about tomorrow's counter check.



"Is it safe to physically take food out of my dog's mouth?"

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

For an ordinary theft with no growling or stiffening, calmly offering a trade (Game 2) is both safer and more effective than reaching in – a hand suddenly appearing near the mouth can startle even an easygoing dog into gulping faster. If your dog ever goes still, stares, or growls when you approach it near food, stop entirely and read Chapter 7; that's a different situation with different rules.

"My dog steals from the trash but never from the counter – different problem or same fix?"

Same fix. The trash can is just a container your dog has learned occasionally produces something interesting, exactly like the counter. Game 2's trade sequence works the same way regardless of where the item came from, and a can with a secure lid removes the loophole the same way a clear kitchen boundary does for the counter.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask



"How long before Game 1 actually works?"

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

Most households see a clear drop in counter-checking within one to two weeks of consistent practice – meaning genuinely zero accidental jackpots during that stretch, not just fewer of them. One slip resets the clock more than people expect, because a recent win outweighs a longer run of nothing in a problem-solving dog's calculations.

"My dog is food-motivated in training but won't touch the puzzle toys – why?"

Usually the puzzle is either too easy to be interesting or too hard to be worth the effort on day one. Start with an easy win – a snuffle mat with food scattered on top rather than buried – so your dog learns puzzles pay off reliably, then increase difficulty gradually from there.

"Can I use a shock mat or spray deterrent on the counter edge?"

We don't recommend it. Aversive deterrents can suppress the behavior on that one counter while doing nothing for the actual drive behind it, and they carry a real risk of making a dog anxious around the kitchen generally, sometimes in ways that show up as other problems later. Game 1 gets the same result – a dog that stops checking – without the side effects.

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“My dog stole something dangerous – chocolate, cooked bones, grapes, an onion – what now?”

Stop reading this book and call your vet or an animal poison control line immediately. This is a medical emergency, not a training moment, and timing matters far more than technique here. Training resumes once your dog is safe.

“Is it okay to just crate my dog during meals instead of doing the training?”

As a short-term management step while you’re building the games, yes – it’s a legitimate loophole-closer. As a permanent substitute for training, it only works while the crate door is shut, and the moment it isn’t, you’ll find nothing about your dog’s decision-making has actually changed.

“I have two dogs and only one steals food – does the training still work the same way?”

Run the games with the food-stealing dog individually where you can, since a second dog nearby can turn a training rep into a competition over who gets the treat first. Once each game is solid one-on-one, practice with both dogs present to make sure the calm behavior holds up when there’s an audience.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

This guide is educational and is not a substitute for veterinary or professional behavioral advice. A dog with a sudden, new increase in food-seeking or food-guarding, or any change in appetite alongside other symptoms, should be seen by a licensed veterinarian first.

When It Didn't Work



Start with an audit, not a bigger correction

If two or three weeks of consistent practice haven't moved the needle, the instinct is to escalate – louder corrections, stricter management, more frustration all round. Resist that. In almost every case we've seen, the actual cause is smaller and more fixable than it looks.

When It Didn't Work

Check for a hidden jackpot first. Ask everyone in the house directly: has anyone left food within reach, slipped a scrap under the table, or forgotten to close the trash can, even once, in the last two weeks? One honest “yes” usually explains an entire plateau. A single unplanned win is powerful enough to undo days of otherwise perfect practice, because to a problem-solving brain, one recent success outweighs a much longer run of nothing.

Check the payoff mismatch. If the puzzle feeder in Game 5 is stocked with plain kibble while the counter has, historically, produced roast chicken, you’re not offering a fair trade – you’re offering a worse option and hoping it wins anyway. Raise the value of what the legitimate outlet pays out; it doesn’t have to be extra calories, just something worth choosing over the alternative.

Check the dose. A handful of attempts over one weekend isn’t enough repetition for a new habit to outcompete an old one that’s been rehearsed for months or years. Give each game genuine daily practice for two to three weeks before deciding it isn’t working.

Most stalled progress resolves at one of these three checkpoints. What’s left, after ruling them out, falls into two categories – and they need very different responses.

When It Didn't Work



The one flag that changes everything: resource guarding

If your dog stiffens, freezes, goes still and stares, growls, snaps, or in any way looks like it might bite when you approach it near food, a stolen item, or its bowl, stop here.

This is not the same problem as the rest of this book, and none of the trade or take-back techniques in Chapter 3 are appropriate to practice on a dog showing these signs – attempting to take an item back from a guarding dog can escalate quickly and is a genuine bite risk to you or anyone else nearby.

When It Didn't Work

If this describes your dog: don't reach for the item, don't stare it down, don't corner it. Calmly create distance, and contact a certified professional dog trainer or a veterinary behaviorist – someone working from a recognized credential such as CPDT-KA, or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist for more severe cases. This is one of the few situations in dog ownership where working with your actual dog, in person, genuinely outperforms anything a book can offer, because the safe handling of it depends on details a page can't see.

When it's a sudden change, not a long-standing habit

A dog that has always been a counter surfer is very different from a dog that suddenly starts obsessively seeking out food after months or years of being unbothered by it. A sudden, new increase in food-seeking, especially alongside any other change – weight loss or gain, increased thirst, changes in energy, or a change in stool – deserves a veterinary visit before any more training. Several medical conditions genuinely increase a dog's drive to find and eat food: diabetes, Cushing's disease, exocrine pancreatic insufficiency, intestinal parasites, and some medications – steroids in particular. No amount of counter-conditioning fixes a cause that was never behavioral. If the hunger arrived suddenly, the vet comes first and the training comes after.

When It Didn't Work

If none of that applies and it's simply slow

Some dogs – often the ones with the longest personal history of counter surfing paying off – take longer than a few weeks to fully update. That's not a sign the method has failed; long-reinforced behavior is simply more expensive to change than a habit that started last month. Keep the management airtight, keep running the games daily, and keep the puzzle rotation genuinely interesting. The dogs that seem the most stuck are often the ones with the most data to unlearn – not the ones the method doesn't work on.

What to take from this chapter

1. Before escalating, check for a recent accidental jackpot – it's the most common hidden cause of a stall.
2. Stiffening, freezing, growling, or snapping near food is a different problem with different, higher-stakes rules. Stop the take-back games and bring in a qualified professional.
3. A sudden change in a previously easygoing dog belongs at the vet first, not in Chapter 3.
4. A long personal history with the behavior means a longer timeline to change it – not a method that's failed.

When It Didn't Work

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