

“WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?”

This exercise is particularly useful for puppies that explore the world with their mouths, although I personally use it with every dog – young or adult – I’ve ever brought into my home. The scenario is as follows: puppy finds a sock (or child’s toy, or rock, or...), we immediately respond in alarm “Sadie, Drop It! Drop It, Sadie!!”, rush to puppy, and wrestle said item out of his mouth. Any puppy owner will tell you this works MAYBE a couple times. And if you have a particularly smart, confident, attention-craving puppy, this might work once. Is puppy *really* learning to “Drop It”? Not really. What puppy *really* learns is: 1. Getting your attention is easy, and 2. You take away all the fun stuff.

The “What Have You Got?” protocol is designed to teach puppy that when he has something in his mouth and you approach him, it’s all good. Because you’re bringing something BETTER.

While this exercise is very useful in changing the way puppy perceives your approach when he has something in his mouth, there are a couple things we need to keep in mind:

Note 1: Management. Nothing replaces Management when it comes to a puppy in our home. It is our job to create an environment where puppy can’t make mistakes. Assume that anything on the floor is fair game for puppy and manage your expectation level.

Note 2: Pick your battles. Some particularly smarty-pants dogs will realize very quickly that they can get your attention (and a treat!) and will annoyingly pick up anything and parade it around like a prized trophy. If the item isn’t dangerous or something important puppy could destroy or consume, ignore him. This includes eye contact. Simply walk away as if you’re going somewhere to do something important. Puppy may follow, and if he does, just keep ignoring him. There are also times when we need to tell a dog to simply “drop it” and take the item and walk away, particularly with adult dogs that have become adept at attention-seeking behavior; an overall attention/affection “diet” might be in order. But again, manage your expectation levels...we want to keep things positive in the puppy stage. **Our goal is to be fair and realistic, so you’ll want to work with me to determine when to make this distinction.**

Step 1

Condition the phrase “What have you got?” to mean treat. To teach your puppy that the words “What have you got?” mean they’re going to get a reward, simply stand/sit near them (they don’t have to sit or perform any behavior) and say “What have you got?” in a happy voice and give a tasty treat. Do this quickly in succession about 25 times. “What have you got?” + treat. (The same way in obedience training you’re conditioning the word “yes” to mean they’re getting ‘paid’).

Step 2

Then, when the dog has simply looked away, or walked away (NOT when he has a sock or other forbidden item in its mouth but simply removed its attention from you) say “What have you got?” and walk toward him. If puppy looks at you expecting a treat, then you’ll know you’ve successfully conditioned the words “What have you got?”: he knows what it means. When your dog responds this way 9 out of 10 times, move to next step. If he’s not getting it yet, go back to step 1 until he understands that the words “What have you got?” mean he’s going to get rewarded.

Step 3

Walk away from the dog and wait until the dog’s attention is elsewhere (again, NOT when it has a forbidden item), say “What have you got?” and reward the dog if he comes running to get a treat, or if he gives you attention as you walk toward him. If he doesn’t, go back to step 2. If he does 9 out of 10 times, move to step 4.

Step 4

Create a distraction for the dog, like hold one of his toys – NOT one that really gets him going but something that doesn’t have a particularly high value to the dog – and encourage him to grab it (like you’re going to play). When he does, or even if he just puts his mouth on it, say “What have you got?” and give him a treat. Do this until your dog is engaging with the toy 9 out of 10 times, then move to step 5.

Step 5

Repeat Step 4 but with a high-value item, like a balled-up sock (usually a favorite for puppies). Toss the item, and when puppy gets it in his mouth, say “What have you got?” and move toward puppy, holding out the delicious reward. Do this until puppy is reliably turning his attention away from the item as you walk toward him, OR if he walks toward you with the item. Once puppy is reliable 9 out of 10 times, you are ready to put the “What have you got?” Protocol in action in real life. Plan on carrying around your treats a lot in the beginning so that you can be ready. Over time, you can intermittently reward your dog; reward every other time, then every two times, then every 3 times over a 30-day period.

Plan on implementing this protocol over a 1- 2 week period, practicing in 5-minute sessions a couple times a day.