

CANINE AGGRESSION: POSSESSIVE, TOY GUARDING, AND FOOD GUARDING AGGRESSION

What is possessive aggression and how is it treated?

Possessive aggression may be directed towards humans or other pets that approach the dog when it is in possession of something that is highly desirable, such as a favorite chew toy, food, or treat. While protecting possessions may be necessary if an animal is to survive and thrive in the wild, it is unacceptable when directed toward people or other pets in a household. What can be confusing for some owners is that it is not always food that brings out the most protective displays. Novel and highly desirable objects such as a tissue that has been stolen from a garbage can, a favored toy, human food, or a piece of rawhide are some of the items that dogs may aggressively protect.

How can possessive aggression be prevented?



Teaching puppies when they are young that handling their food and possession results in good things will help deter possessive behaviors. If a puppy is eating, calmly approaching and talking softly while perhaps petting and dropping delectable food treats into the bowl will help the puppy learn that your approach is non-threatening. Once they are comfortable with that, you can gently restrain the puppy and remove the bowl, then praise the puppy and promptly return the bowl. The same can be done while a puppy is playing with their toys. Approaching calmly, offering a food reward and taking the possession, praising the puppy and returning the object teaches the puppy that your actions are not to be feared. Using a leash can help insure success at the outset with a minimum of confrontation (See our handout on puppy handling and food bowl exercises).

How can I treat my dog if he is possessive with objects and toys?

Treatment must first be directed at preventing possible injury. At first it may be best to confine or supervise your dog so that it cannot gain access to any items that it might pick up and protect. Blocking off areas so that the dog does not have access to certain items might also be necessary. Dogs that protect their treats or toys should have them taken away, and only allowed access to them when alone in the crate or confinement room. In fact, by giving these items exclusively in your pet's confinement area your dog may learn to be more comfortable resting and relaxing in this area since it is a place where chew toys are given and where the dog is left alone. Highly valued items (e.g. the ones the dog is most likely to protect) such as rawhide bones, pig's ears, etc. should not be given to the dog. Of course if there are items that your dog might steal and then protect, you should keep these out of the dog's reach by using sealed containers, or keeping them behind closed doors or high enough that the dog cannot reach. To prevent stealing and to teach leave, you should keep your dog supervised with a long leash attached to a head collar, so that your dog can be prevented from wandering off, and immediately interrupted if it attempts to raid a garbage can or pick up inappropriate objects (See our handout on stealing and teaching give). Booby-traps (shock mats, Snappy Trainers™, motion detectors, unpleasant tastes) can also be used to teach your dog to stay away from selected objects (See our handouts on canine punishment and behavior products). Dogs that protect their food can be given a less palatable diet, and fed in a separate room away from family members.

Although prevention can help to ensure safety, if the problem is to be corrected your dog will need to be taught to accept approaches and give up objects on command. The goal is to train the dog that it will receive a favored treat or reward that is even more appealing than the object in its possession. However, you must first have good control and a well-trained dog. If your dog will not sit and stay, come, or allow approach when it has no object in its possession, then there is little chance of correcting a possessive problem. For details, see section on food guarding in our 'Puppy handling and food bowl' handout and in our handout on 'Controlling stealing and teaching give'.

How can I deal with food guarding behavior?

Some dogs continue to aggressively guard their food even if worked with as puppies. Punitive attempts to change them, making the dog wait and perform numerous tasks for food, or factors that cause increased hunger tend to exacerbate rather than diminish the behavior. In fact, while you should be able to remove your puppy's toys or food bowl and approach or pet your dog when it is eating or chewing on a toy, dogs that are possessive are more likely to increase their aggression if you keep taking away their food or toy and giving nothing positive in return. On the other hand if you back off from a dog that is growling or threatening, then the behavior has been reinforced.

The first step is to remove any conflict or anxiety from the feeding situation. The food bowl should be picked up and put away when it is not mealtime. In general the dog should be fed scheduled mealtimes and not free choice (although in rare cases free choice feeding may reduce the increased arousal and aggression around the food bowl, but not the possessiveness of novel foods and treats). When food is prepared, the dog should be outside or in another room. The food is then placed in a secure location, preferably a room with a door that can be completely latched and/or locked or a crate if the dog is used to one (locking the door is essential if young children are in the home). The dog is then placed in the room or crate with the food and the door is shut. When the dog is finished eating they often will bark or scratch at the door to be released. The dog is released and let outside, and while the dog is gone the bowl is picked up and put away. At no time should the dog be fed in a location where other people are present since this presents a danger to those in the vicinity of the dog while it eats.

For some dogs this will help decrease their anxiety and remove the source of conflict between the family and the pet, and may be the lifelong solution. In other situations, if the aggression is not severe and the dog is not aggressive about an empty food bowl, retraining can be attempted. This often entails measured and controlled feeding. The exercise can be performed with a leash and head collar for additional control should the dog not respond to your commands or should aggression begin to emerge. The dog's daily ration is split into multiple portions. The dog is asked to sit/stay and a small amount of food is placed in the bowl; then the bowl is placed on the floor and the person steps back 2-4 feet. The dog is then released to eat this amount. Once the dog has consumed the amount he is backed away from the bowl, asked again to sit/stay and the bowl is picked up, repeating the process until the whole meal is consumed. Occasionally a special treat can be added to the next portion of food. If at any time the dog stiffens or growls, the session ends and, once the dog leaves the bowl, it is picked up and put away.

Another option might be to use two food bowls well apart from each other. Have your dog sit and stay, place a small amount of food in one bowl and walk away to where the next bowl is located. When your dog is finished, have it sit and stay and then put food in the second bowl. If you divide the food into 4 to 8 portions you can move back and forth between food bowls and offer an occasional special treat in one of the bowls. Once there are no signs of anxiety or aggression, the bowls can be moved closer together; finally, move on to the single bowl technique above. Training should eventually progress so that you are standing beside the dog while the food bowl is lifted and refilled (sometimes adding a separate treat). Again very small portions should be used, and a head halter should be used to insure success. Have the dog sit after each small feeding is finished, lift the bowl, add food or a treat, and return it to the floor before releasing the dog to eat. Finally, move on to slightly larger portions and try and get the dog to sit during the eating (with command and leash and head halter) so that you can take the food bowl away, add more food and an occasional special treat and return it to the dog. It may not be safe to progress to patting the dog during eating or walking away and approaching, although under the supervision of a behaviorist, and with the use of a head halter and leash, additional progress might be possible. At no time should the dog be confronted or reprimanded; the session should merely end. Later the dog can be offered his food in confinement as described above. This type of retraining is often best attempted under the supervision of a veterinary behaviorist.

How best can I teach my dog to give up objects?

You need to teach your dog a command that tells him not to touch an item and a command for giving up the item. Often the command "leave it" is used to teach dogs not to pick up certain items in their mouth. It is easiest to teach "leave it" using a head collar and leash. Start with the dog wearing a head collar and an adult holding the leash. The dog is then walked toward an item he may wish to pick up, such as a ball or chew toy. As the dog reaches for the item, calmly say, "leave it" and turn the dog's head using the head collar; quickly offer a food reward and "good dog" as the head comes toward you. Repeat several times with low-value items. As the dog

learns the meaning of the phrase he will begin to turn his head, perhaps even without a pull of the leash. Immediately reward that behavior. Progress to more valued items and gradually phase out food rewards while retaining verbal praise. At the same time, throwing small treats on the floor, having your dog stay by your side and then using a “take it” command, can help to teach the dog that you will be responsible for what the dog takes and leaves (See our handout on play and exercise for dogs).

If the dog already has the item, he will need to know a “drop it” command which tells him to give up the object. Initially this task is taught with an item that is of low value to the dog (like a wooden spoon), and with high-value rewards. While the dog is holding the item, he is offered a small piece of food; as the dog opens his mouth to take the food and say “drop it”. Repeat several times so that the dog begins to anticipate the actions. Next, hold the food away from the dog and say “drop it”, only giving the food once the item has been dropped. Repeat until the response is reliable and then begin to phase out the food by skipping the food reward on some repetitions. Gradually use items that the dog values more. As you increase the value of the item, you may need to reinstate continuous food rewards until the drop command becomes reliable. (See our handouts on ‘stealing and teaching give’ and on ‘play and exercise’).



Usually my dog knows “drop it” or “leave it” but for some really valuable items he just won’t comply. What’s next?

For some dogs, a diversion with something else they really want to do will result in them leaving an object. This may be a walk, a ride in the car, ringing the doorbell etc. If the dog is offered an alternate activity, it must be given, even if it is short. In some situations this may not work or be appropriate. For example, you may need to trade for stolen items of value or for those that are dangerous to the pet; these items need to be retrieved quickly before they are damaged or the pet is injured. Only the adult that has the most control over the dog, never children, should attempt this exercise. When the dog has the stolen item, the owner goes and gets a highly valued food reward that the dog reliably wants. Then the food is shown to the dog from 5-6 feet away and the dog is called to “come”. When the dog leaves the item, the owner backs up and calls the dog again and adds, “sit”. This is repeated 2-3 times without giving the dog the food reward until he is at least 15-20 feet from the object and preferably in another room. The dog is then given the food, gently taken by the collar if he will reliably allow that, and put outside or into another room with a closed door. Only at that time does the owner retrieve the item. The exchange NEVER takes place right in front of the dog and the item. If at any time the dog shows aggression such as growling, snarling (lifting the lips), snapping, lunging or biting, leave the area immediately and do not attempt to take the item from the dog. This problem is dangerous and serious and requires the intervention of a veterinary behaviorist.

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Lucky Dog Sports Club,
300 S. Central Blvd. Suite B, Jupiter, FL 33458.
Email: woof@luckydogssportsclub.com
Web: www.luckydogssportsclub.com
Phone: 561-427-6700
Fax: 561-748-3699

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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