



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Behavior Modification Handout

Resource Guarding

An unfortunate problem for many dogs and their owners, resource guarding can be a challenge to control once the behavior is firmly established. Prevention should be part of your regular training regimen. Practicing desensitizing and counter - conditioning exercises with your dog on a daily basis will be helpful in avoiding future issues and controlling current problems you may be having.

Starting Off on the Right Paw

It's never too early to begin training. Your puppy starts to learn the moment he enters the world and early socialization will help mold his adult dog personality. Exposing your puppy, in a controlled environment, to new sights, sounds, smells, people and other animals will create a less fearful and more confident pet that is better equipped to deal with our day - to - day lives. Early socialization is critical to the mental and behavior well being of your pet. If your pet has joined your family later in life and you are unsure of his history you can and should still practice socialization skills. Using positive reinforcement (giving treats or play time) when your dog is experiencing a new situation that may be frightening (desensitizing) will help to change his mind (counter - condition) about the scary things. Your dog will develop a positive association with these things.

Some exercises you can start with that will make your dog safer and more comfortable around food and his bowl:

- Hand feeding his meal. He associates the resource (food) coming from you and you + his food becomes a good thing. The behavior of guarding a bowl or feeding location has less opportunity to develop.
- Holding his food bowl while he eats (ONLY if this can be done safely) and dropping in special treats every few seconds.
- Move the food bowl around. Change locations frequently to different areas of the room or house.
- Portion feeding time. Feed small amounts of food at a time. One meal can be divided into 6-8 separate portions. Once your dog has finished the first portion he may have the next and so on until his complete meal has been eaten. This also works great for dogs that like to gobble down their food too quickly.
- Approach the food bowl (ONLY if this can be done safely) while your dog is eating and drop in a special treat like a small piece of chicken or cheese. When you are around, better stuff appears in the food bowl!
- Nothing in life is free. Have your dog work for his resources. You can access a copy of the handout for this training at www.humanebroward.com.

NOTE: These exercises are predominately targeted at food / food bowl guarding behaviors.

Managing Your Environment

Eliminating opportunities for your dog to practice his guarding behavior is essential in controlling the behavior. The more chances he has to practice the bad behavior the bigger the habit will become. If you know he will guard it he should not get it, of course with the exception of his regular meal time. Most dogs will guard a big greasy, meaty steak bone and with good reason. This is a very valuable resource that your dog highly desires but if you cannot safely take it away from your dog then you should never give it to him. If you are fortunate, your dog may only guard this type of item (a highly valued target but not an everyday occurrence) and managing your environment will be much easier. Some dogs may guard their food, a special toy, his bed, his owner. The more a dog guards or the less predictable his guarding targets are, the harder it will be to control the behavior. Other factors that should be considered when addressing guarding behaviors and the safety of a training program are:

- Your ability as the owner (or family) to follow a training plan.
- What type of dog do you have and is this a family with small children? The larger and more powerful dog you have increases the potential for serious injury.
- Has your dog actually bitten and if so the seriousness of the bite? Did it require medical attention?
- Is your dog predictable? Do you know what he is going to guard and how he is going to guard it?
- Does your dog have a good warning system (lots of growling and posturing but never or rarely any snapping or biting)?

The answers to these and other questions will help you to outline the potential success of a training plan. Determining safe parameters for your family and your pet is critical before proceeding with any training plan.

DESENSITIZING AND COUNTER - CONDITIONING

The anti – resource guarding training will be a gradual process of desensitizing and counter - conditioning. The same process can be used for different types of resource guarding i.e.: Food guarding, object guarding (toys, rawhides), location guarding (the bed). You may need the assistance of a professional trainer or animal behaviorist to help you assess your situation and begin a training program. This type of training can be complicated and dangerous and getting the help you need will set the stage for a successful outcome and avoid possibly making matters worse.

Begin by identifying and dividing targets. Targets are the items your dog guards. The three categories are food, object and location. Only work with one target at a time. You do not want to start training with your dog lying on his favorite bed with his most cherished toy right before dinner time! Have realistic expectations, set your dog up for success. Some additional variables may be distance, who in the family is the guarding directed at, intensity levels, and time of possession. You will need to allow for variables and adjust your training approach as necessary. One of the basic ground rules for D&C training is to start from a level of tolerance that will not elicit a guarding response from your dog. For an example of a training plan we will briefly outline a food guarding exercise.

Food guarding exercise:

Food guarding is the least complicated guarding issue to address. It is important to remember to take your time; you cannot rush this type of training. It will take time and patience. For safety sake, your dog may require a muzzle or to be leashed during training. Your dog must be adequately acclimated to each (muzzle or leash) prior to beginning training.

- Start with an empty food bowl and gently toss treats from about 10 ft away towards the bowl. Use a high value food item, chicken, cheese or whatever your dog finds really yummy.
- Move closer to the bowl as your dog becomes accustomed to the game and is comfortable from that distance. Some dogs may only guard once you are closer to the bowl or if it actually has food in it and the first steps of this exercise can go very quickly. If your dog guards an empty bowl from 10 ft start with a new bowl in a different location.
- Approach bowl from the same distance (10 ft) and drop treats in bowl. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach as your dog becomes comfortable.
- Remember to go slow and do not push your dog too hard. You want an eager and happy response from your pet not a growly or stressed response. If your dog is showing signs of stress then you are going too fast. Stop and go back to the part of the exercise he was comfortable with.
- When you can approach bowl successfully start back at 10 ft again and approach bowl but add bending down a little, like you would if you were going to pick up the bowl. DO NOT touch the bowl yet. Drop in a treat. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach as your dog becomes comfortable.
- Approach from 10 ft, bend down, pause a second or two with your hand extended out slightly then drop in treat. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach and lengthen pauses as your dog becomes comfortable with this part of the exercise.
- Approach bowl from the same distance (10 ft), bend down, touch bowl (with your other hand, not treat hand) for a second then drop treats in bowl. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach and lengthen bowl touches as your dog becomes comfortable with this part of the exercise.
- Approach bowl from the same distance (10 ft), bend down, hold on to bowl (with your other hand, not treat hand) and move it around for a second then drop treats in bowl. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach and lengthen time of bowl holding and moving as your dog becomes comfortable with this part of the exercise.
- Approach bowl from the same distance (10 ft) bend down, pick up bowl (with your other hand, not treat hand) and stand up for a second, replace bowl then drop treats in bowl. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach and lengthen time of bowl holding as your dog becomes comfortable with this part of the exercise.

- Approach bowl from the same distance (10 ft), bend down, pick up bowl (with your other hand, not treat hand) and move to food preparation area, replace bowl then drop treats in bowl. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach and lengthen time of faux food preparation as your dog becomes comfortable with this part of the exercise.
- Approach bowl from the same distance (10 ft), pet dog's back for 1 second. Drop treats in bowl. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach and lengthen time of petting as your dog becomes comfortable with this part of the exercise.
- Approach bowl from the same distance (10 ft), pet dog's back for 1 second. Pick up bowl drop treats in bowl and replace. Walk away. Repeat (8-10 repetitions).
- Decrease distance from which you approach and lengthen time of petting and holding bowl as your dog becomes comfortable with this part of the exercise.

You get the idea. The above training outline is a long and drawn out process. Take baby steps, with each gradual increase closer to the desired behavior. The process is exact and deliberate; if you skip ahead too fast you can create too much training pressure and cause a guarding behavior relapse undoing any progress you may have accomplished.

This is only the first sequences (empty bowl) of the training. From here repeat each of the above steps for three additional categories.

1. Empty bowl
2. Bowl with dry food
3. Bowl with dry and wet food mixture
4. Bowl with wet food

Each sequence must be completed using the entire training outline.

TIPS AND HINTS

- Using punishment will not correct the undesired behavior and may cause other behavior problems to emerge. Physical punishment will not address the cause of the behavior and could even make things worse.
- Your dog or puppy may learn to be afraid of you.
- He may become defensive and develop aggressive behaviors.
- He could shy away from physical interactions with you, such as not wanting to be petted.
- Fearful behaviors will influence future training and make learning difficult for your pet.
- Take your time. This type of training is not a quick fix.
- Safety first. Do not put yourself in a vulnerable position that may result in injury.
- It is important to set your dog up for success. Each step of the training should start from a level that enables your dog to get it right. Don't push too hard too fast.