



Trainers Academy, LLC

Dear WOOF:

We have a 6-month-old Bernese male puppy. Recently, a friend gave him a rawhide bone (we were going to supervise as we do not like these). My 10 y.o. daughter went to pet him as she frequently does when he is chewing a toy. He growled very aggressively and jerked away. We have never experienced this behavior with anything else he has been occupied with. We pull away his food, etc and have no problems at all. He also sit-stays in order to be fed.

We have since tried to work with a “drop it” replacing the rawhide with a treat and he is better but still gives a low growl before we take it. We also have left it in front of him and used the leave it with success.

Our concern: what if there is something else that creates this territorialism and we will not know? Does this desensitizing translate to other things? It is very unusual for a BMD to be aggressive (this is out 5th) but he will remain intact, so we just want to do best by this little guy.

Thanks!

Hello:

To start with, I must caution you to ensure everyone’s safety (especially your daughter’s) by advising that you not continue to give him rawhides, or any new chew bones, etc. until you have consulted with a qualified professional for a complete evaluation and guidance. While in most cases this is a highly treatable problem, if not done correctly it can be very dangerous.

You write that you are seeing some improvement in his behavior using a “drop it” cue and replacing the rawhide with treats – BUT you also write that he is emitting a “low growl” before you take it, which tells me that he is definitely NOT happy about what is happening. It’s very possible that continuing these exercises may actually be making the problem worse. He is starting to learn that mere growling is not enough to make you back off, so the risk that he could use more overt behavior (possibly a snap or worse) is getting higher. In addition to that, the fact that he is, and will remain intact, may further complicate things.

Since every dog and every situation is unique, there is no “quick fix” or “recipe” for treatment. In order to successfully modify his behavior and make sure everyone stays safe during the process, you need the guidance of a professional who will thoroughly investigate his behavior, and outline a specific plan for you to follow.

With that said, let’s look at where this behavior comes from, and why it is so common. Dogs are genetically predisposed to use aggressive behavior and will naturally do so under a multitude of circumstances; to keep control of a valued possession is right at the top of the list. In this case, he really liked the rawhide (valuable) **AND** it was something new to him, which increased its value even more, making his instinct to “guard” it that much more heightened. Even though your daughter may not have made any moves to take it from him, he still perceived her actions as a threat. Dogs respond to threats, *whether real or perceived*.

This is a very common problem in dogs, and it is important to understand that ALL dogs, regardless of breed or age, are at risk to develop it unless active measures are taken (preferably in early puppy hood) to prevent it. Good puppy classes cover this topic thoroughly, and provide

prevention-training exercises. In addition, early intervention is critical when you discover that your dog has a problem, because the longer it goes on, the more “practice” the dog gets, and the harder it becomes to treat.

In your situation there is some good news. First, he did not inflict a bite to your daughter – VERY good news indeed. Secondly, it is the first time you’ve seen him act this way, and he is young. So up to this point he’s not had lots of guarding “practice”, which may make treating the problem a little easier, than say a dog who’s been exhibiting this kind of behavior with multiple objects for a long period of time.

Next, I’d like to answer a couple of questions that you ask in your email.

You wrote: **Our concern: what if there is something else that creates this territorialism and we will not know?**

I believe that you are asking how to know if he will have a problem with other objects. If I have interpreted this correctly, the answer is twofold:

1 – There is no way to “predict” what he will have an issue with – but at this point, it’s clear that rawhides (or any rawhide-like chews) are going to be an issue. For now, you must stay on the side of caution, and assume that anything new that you introduce to him may trigger a guarding episode.

2 – A qualified Behavioral Consultant will be sure to cover **all** the bases with you for training him to be ok, no matter what he has.

You wrote: **Does this desensitizing translate to other things?** I assume that you mean to ask whether or not treatment will generalize to other things. For example, if he learns to be ok with a rawhide, will he also be ok with a pig ear? If I have interpreted your question correctly, the answer is “No”, that will not happen automatically. Helping your dog feel comfortable no matter what he has, especially “new” things will take extra work.

Without having done a full assessment, it is not safe for me to outline a specific treatment plan for you at this point. While the ultimate goal is for you to teach your dog to want people to approach and take valued objects from him, where to start can be very tricky and will make a difference between success and failure.

Please contact me directly at 248-616-6500 do that we can talk more in-depth. If you live outside the Metro Detroit area, I will be happy to refer you to a qualified professional in your area.

Good for you that you are seeking help right away!

Thanks for writing. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Lisa Patrona, Dip. DTBC, CPDT-KA



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