



Trainers Academy, LLC

OBJECT GUARDING PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Object guarders typically guard bones, valued chew toys and forbidden objects such as bones, plastic wrap, Kleenexes, stolen laundry items, and garbage on the ground. With some of these dogs, there is a compulsive quality to their guarding; it resembles a wired-in reflex. Others seem triggered not just by the fact that they think the hamburger wrapper is so valuable but by the fact that you are treating it as though it is an extremely valuable artifact by demonstrating such heated interest in taking it away. This, I realize, is a catch-22 for the owner. Either ignore the dog and allow him to pick up and even ingest all manner of junk he finds on the ground or else increase the value of the item by showing great interest in taking it away from him. The ultimate solution for all object guarders lies in priming and rehearsing the problem scenarios in advance. The dog needs to have done zillions of object exchange exercises in preparation for the Big Day when he gets something truly dangerous which you have to remove from his mouth pronto. If he's relaxed and confident, he'll relinquish. If he's tense and insecure, he won't. You are one step ahead of the game if you start practicing on your puppy. And, just like socialization, the younger you start the better.

The basic object exchange exercise goes like this:

- 1) Give the dog an object (in early training this will be an object he is unlikely to guard, later you will progress to "hot" objects)
- 2) Say "give" or "thank you"
- 3) Take the object away
- 4) Give a nice treat from your pocket
- 5) Give the object back and repeat

Do five or so in a row and then walk away. Try to do a few "sets" of five repetitions a day, varying the object each time so the trend emerges: when humans take things away, it is a Very Good Thing for Dogs (VGTD). When some history of successful exchanges is in place (several days worth of a few sets a day), you may also start to practice taking away chew toys the puppy has spontaneously taken possession of. Do a set of five and then let him carry on chewing. Always be aware of the value of the item you are taking away. For "hot" (highly valued by the dog) object, increase accordingly the value of the surprise treat he gets in exchange. You may reserve special treats, like a morsel of leftover turkey or a chunk of old cheddar cheese, for exchanges with the trickiest objects. These rare rewards really make an impression. Here's a typical hierarchy:

- 1) Set up exchanges with objects of no interest (several sets of five a day for 2 days)
- 2) Set up exchanges with slightly more coveted objects (several sets of five a day for 2 days)
- 3) Set up exchanges with hot objects, using extra special treats (several sets of five a day for 2-3 days)
- 4) Exchanges with objects the dog has spontaneously taken possession of (do several in a row then leave the dog with it, unless it is a forbidden object, then

give an extra special reward on the last trial and replace object with a chew toy)

- 5) Exchanges with hot objects the dog has spontaneously taken possession of (do several in a row for extra special rewards, then return object to dog or replace with interesting chew toy)
- 6) Maintenance: Occasional “cold trials” when dog has an object (one rewarded rep, then give toy back or replace forbidden objects with chew toy)

Proceed to the next exercise in the hierarchy only when the dog is good at the exercise you are currently working on. For the duration of working this hierarchy, it is helpful if the dog is never given access to anything which is above the level you are training. This sets you both up for guaranteed failure. For example, if the dog is on step 4, keep “hot” objects out of reach until you are ready to start step 5. You can't run until you can crawl and walk. For exercise #5, you may have to deliberately leave around a hot object so the dog will “spontaneously” take possession. It is much better to have rehearsed in advance the Kleenex or grease-covered plastic wrap-guarding drama than to have it sprung on you when you aren't ready.

Sufficient repetition of object exchange exercises results in a dog who is actually eager for you to take stuff away from him. Aside from the reinforcement of the food reward the dog is getting a key bit of information: when humans take things away, they very often give them back. It is therefore, No Big Deal. This is pretty unheard of in dog culture. When the dog is relaxed about exchanges, be sure to test the system with the occasional cold trial. Walk up to the dog while he's in mid-chew, take his toy away, pop him a surprise reward and then let him carry on. Like any behavior, relaxed relinquishing may drift if it's not maintained.

In dogs with existing guarding problems, proceed with great care, softening up the mouth if necessary ahead of time and using protective gear such as gloves, padding, or muzzles. Under no circumstances should children do any of this. If there are kids in the house, they will need to practice with the dog but if and only if:

- 1) The dog likes the kids
- 2) The dog has a well-installed soft mouth or is muzzled for all exercises
- 3) All adult members of the household have successfully completed the entire hierarchy already
- 4) The exercises done by the kids are supervised by an adult every second

This holds for all desensitization exercises (food bowl, location guarding, and handleability), not just object guarding. Be aware that, if your dog is an object guarder and you get and keep it at bay with these exercises but don't have kids at home, your dog is still at very high risk to guard against kids. Dogs don't generalize very well. In fact, even if your dog has never guarded against you, there's a reasonable chance he will guard against strangers, especially kids, particularly if he is not beautifully socialized to kids. If you're a laissez-faire kind of dog owner, get your head out of the sand before your dog bites a visiting child. Owning a dog is a huge responsibility, both to the dog and to the public at large. Above all, start practicing when the dog is young. With puppies, you can practice this exercise with all manner of objects, including the supper dishes, bones, coveted chew toys, and the ubiquitous Kleenex. Make it a game.

An extremely cunning move in the anti-object guarding war is to teach your dog to

retrieve. Aside from being an efficient exercise and predatory energy burner, using guarded objects as retrieve toys is a potent counter conditioning monkey wrench you can throw in the object guarding machinery. Simply playing with the dog with these “hot” items can be an enormous tension reducer for both dog and handler. Play your hand very carefully the first few times you try this. The dog should first of all have an enthusiastic, well-conditioned retrieve of non-guarded items. The first time you try using guarded objects in retrieve games, whatever you do, stay glued to your chair so you don't slip into the usual rut of chasing the dog and demonstrate hot interest in the object itself. Play very casual and hard to get, just as you would for the dog's usual retrieval toy. Be prepared, for instance to reward evidence of turning toward you or any steps back in your direction once he's got hold of the object. Celebrate each step with enthusiastic cheering and extra large, extra nice food rewards. The gradually crank up the standard as he gets better. It is perfectly reasonable to expect, with sufficient practice, your previously rabid object guarder to happily fetch, and drop in your lap, items which used to be hot.



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