

Desensitizing Possessive Behavior Parts I & II

PART I

Dogs are wonderful companions. They're loyal, friendly, affectionate, and fun to be around. Why then, are there so many dog bites in this country, most of them inflicted on children?

Trouble is, we humans don't like to admit that in addition to the fine qualities mentioned above, dogs are also aggressive, territorial animals with strong teeth and jaws and a hard-wired "bite or flight" instinct. In other words, a dog that bites a child who takes a toy from him is behaving normally. This is hard for people to accept, but it's necessary if we are to reduce the number of dog bites and the ensuing anti-dog legislation that is becoming more common every day. And there is something we can do about it.

In Culture Clash, Jean Donaldson says that "dogs are unaware that they've been adopted into a culture where biting is considered a betrayal of trust and a capital offense" (p. 58). Dogs don't consider biting a betrayal; it's just communication to them. How is a dog to understand that we can't accept that in relation to humans? The simple answer is that you can't explain to a dog that biting a human being may get him killed or cause him to lose his home. If you try to do so (using the so-called "alpha" techniques involving mild to moderate aggression towards the dog) you will actually increase the likelihood that the dog will bite you or someone else. Aggression tends to lead to aggression. What you can do, however, is recondition the dog to accept what he normally would not accept. Through reconditioning, you can actually cause a dog to think that having toys, contraband items, and even food taken from him is good – that it's likely to result in reinforcement, just like sitting for petting or lying down.

Here's an example of how I used positive reinforcement training to recondition my own dog. While crated at an agility show last summer, my Australian Shepherd Tucker managed to pull a zip-lock bag containing my daughter's make-up stuff (which we had foolishly left within reach) into his crate. Tucker was happily chewing the make-up and was about to start on the blush and metal barrettes (yup, Aussies will eat anything!) when two strangers noticed what was happening. They opened his crate, and removed the contraband from his mouth. Tucker's response was to wag his tail at them, willingly give up the stuff, and smile happily, as if to say, "Hi there – whatcha got?" The people were amazed. And their admiration of Tucker's good manners was great positive reinforcement for me. Why? Because Tucker is an extremely confident, even pushy, representative of a confident, pushy, breed. I had not raised him from a puppy; in fact I had adopted him from Aussie Rescue 1-1/2 years ago and the first time I tried to put him in a crate he had growled at me. Here he was on his own turf, approached by total strangers. Why did he just let them take what he was so obviously enjoying? Because from the time we've had him, we have worked with him regularly on two exercises:

Object exchange and food bowl games.

He had been reinforced so many times for handing things to us that he never even thought twice about allowing someone else to open his crate and reach into his mouth. Most other dogs would have bitten or at least growled – normal dog behavior. But Tucker's reconditioning enabled him to accept what does not come naturally to dogs. By reconditioning his natural possessiveness, he now believes that giving up an object means getting something better.

In Part II of this series, I will explain how you can go about reconditioning your puppy or adult dog to accept what most dogs will not. Please keep reading, and plan to work with your dog on these exercises. Remember that in today's society, if a dog bites someone more than once, chances are high that he'll be euthanized. So making a commitment to reconditioning may just save your dog's life!

PART II: Recondition Possessiveness with Object Exchange

In part one of this series, I discussed the fact that normal behavior for dogs includes not only the loyal affection they are admired for, but also several behaviors (biting and growling) that human beings can't accept. Preventing aggression by reconditioning your dog with positive reinforcement is the humane solution required of us when we bring these "aliens" into our homes. And it's relatively easy to do, especially if you're starting with a puppy.

First, work on "object exchanges." As carnivores, dogs defend their "kill" from others (whether its a caribou carcass or a tennis ball). However, we can recondition the dog to feel relaxed, rather than aggressive, about giving up a toy by offering to exchange with the dog for something better. Start with a toy the puppy feels lukewarm about. Show him a treat, and when he drops the toy to take it, use your clicker (or a word, such as "yes!") and give him the treat. Once he's doing this consistently, add the cue "out" or "drop it." Then try it with a more popular toy. Once this is going very well, touch the toy with your hand and say "out," reinforcing heavily with food.

Also teach your dog cooperation by playing the "two toy game". Use two (or three) of the exact same toy, then throw one toy. Your puppy will run out for it, and as the puppy returns, show him a second one. Toss it in the air and catch it yourself or slap it on the floor to make it seem more attractive than the one he's got in his mouth. When he drops the first toy, throw the second, then pick up the first and repeat the whole thing. He'll quickly figure out that dropping the toy makes you play, while keeping it makes you quit.

It's also very important to work on "food bowl games". I don't agree with forcing dogs to allow people to take food from them or risk punishment. This is asking for aggression from the dog, and eventually, you'll get it – if not towards you, then towards a child or a stranger. Instead, as with object exchange, you can recondition the dog to think that hands near bowls are harbingers of good things, while never provoking a bite or a growl. After you put your puppy's bowl down, add a few really tasty treats (different from her regular food) as she eats. After a few days of this, keep your hand in the bowl for a few seconds while the puppy eats the treats (not his entire dinner). Occasionally

(once a week or less) pick up the food bowl, add the treats, and immediately put it back down. The puppy should soon look happy and expectant when you approach her bowl, not distressed. If she appears nervous, you need to back up to step one. Add treats regularly until the dog is at least a year old, and occasionally throughout the dog's life to keep her response to your approaching her bowl one of anticipation of good things to come.

WARNING: These suggestions are for use with puppies under 16 weeks of age. If you are starting with an older puppy or adult dog, you may be taking risks with these exercises and should consider working on them with a trainer who uses positive reinforcement methods.

Reconditioning training is never a chance to prove who is the boss. If you turn it into a power play, you may well get bitten. You aren't exerting your "control" over the dog in any way, but instead are making your presence around the dog's possessions a sign that even better treats are coming.

Children should, of course, be closely supervised around dogs, regardless of the dog's training or reconditioning. Given the range of behaviors both kids and dogs exhibit, it isn't possible to make a dog completely "kid proof". But by changing your dog's motivation to guard objects, you are increasing the chances that if something happens beyond your control, he'll have a relaxed response rather than an aggressive one. And that could save his life.

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