



Maplewood Dog Training

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How to Prevent & Treat Resource Guarding or “The Trade Game”

By Katrin Andberg

What is Resource Guarding?

To many people, resource guarding is food aggression in dogs. While aggression surrounding the food dish or meal times is a common example of resource guarding, resource guarding is not limited to the food dish. **Resource guarding is the behavior pattern of a dog snarling, showing his teeth, growling, biting, standing, or lying, over the object, increasing speed or ferocity of ingestion of an object, or otherwise giving direct outward signals that he is uncomfortable with another dog or person approaching, in an attempt to control the other dog or person’s behavior, and not lose access to the object, person or space that he currently has.**

Dogs will commonly resource guard people, such as a primary caretaker, objects, such as a favorite toy or bone, and places, such as the bed or couch. In its extreme forms, dogs will choose a person, object or place to resource guard with little warning. A dog may decide that the pencil your son dropped on the floor while doing his homework at the kitchen table, is now an object to guard. He may decide that the throw rug in the front hall is now a place to guard. He may decide that your Aunt Wilma, who is visiting for the weekend, from out of state, is now a person to guard. The person, object or place does not need to be an entity that your dog has, at any past point, showed any particular attention or interest in.

Resource guarding, to your dog, is all about control. Can he control his outside environment and the other people and animals in it, to keep them away from the object, person or place that he desires? In attempt to control his environment and keep what he is guarding in his possession and “safe,” he resorts to aggressive responses such as growling, snarling, curling his lips or, as a last resort, biting. Dogs do not have the faculties for verbal language communication that humans have, but to compare to people, even people resort to violence when they feel what is theirs is threatened.

The Trade Game

The Trade Game is a simple give and take relationship exercise that you can teach a dog of any age. This “game” is an excellent exercise to teach your dog to assist in both the prevention and treatment of resource guarding. Implementing the principles of the trade game with a young puppy or adolescent dog, also assists

immeasurably in preventing the ingestion of foreign objects and prevents the need for costly and often times heart wrenching or heart breaking major obstruction surgery.

The basic principle of the trade game is to teach your dog that rather than running away with, hiding with or aggressively guarding over an object, if he willingly brings you the object, you will happily and reliably give him something he finds more valuable in return. This exercise of “trading” an object your dog has in his possession that he finds valuable, for an item that is in your possession that he finds more valuable, sets up a strong, low stress reinforcement history of your dog willingly deferring to you when he finds something he wants, instead of attempting to control his possession of that item with aggression and force.

In this exercise, the trade is always presented to the dog as an option that is the dog’s own choice. There is no force, confrontation or coercion from the person. The person simply presents the trade option to the dog, and presents it in such, that the item the person offers to the dog is one that the dog would deem as a “fair” trade. **Because what is deemed a “fair” trade is always up to the dog, it is the person’s responsibility, and in their best interest, to be intimately familiar with what value their dog places on different items.** For example, a bit of last night’s roast beef dinner may get a value of 10+ to your dog on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being, “YES! I WANT TO TRADE FOR THAT 110%!!!”, a tennis ball or his favorite toy may be a 7 value and his dry dog food kibble, a 2. Every dog, just like every person, has their own preferences and values for items, so it would be unwise to assume that your dog would place a number 10 value on roast beef without first testing it out with your dog. You never want to present a situation to your dog, where the item you offer to trade, in your dog’s mind, has lesser value than what he has in his possession and is not a fair trade. Again, remember, the decision to trade is all up to your dog, it’s your job to present a trade that makes him immediately say, “Absolutely, that’s a fair deal, I’ll trade for that!”

To implement the trade game, when you notice your dog has stolen, or otherwise gained an item that you do not want him to have into his possession, rather than get upset, make any fast movements, or chase the dog **(never chase a dog that has something you don’t want him to have. You never want to teach your dog that running away and hiding with an object is a viable option. The dog who bolts away with a valued object is likely to begin eating that object as fast as he possibly can, and the chance that he will need major surgery to remove that item, is incredibly high),**

1. Go and get a piece of food or other item that your dog would deem a “fair trade” and present it to your dog.
2. If you are standing, stand up straight, and to the side of your dog. Don’t lean over your dog, stare directly at him, stand blocking his exit or appear confrontational to him in any way. If you feel safe and prefer getting down to his level, squat down, again do not lean over him, and deflect your body pressure off to the side of him, never blocking his exit.

3. Put the trade item into your hand and show it to your dog, while at the same time asking your dog, “Do you want to trade?” Because you have carefully chosen your trade item, with much forethought, your dog should stop a minute, sniff what you are offering to him and decide if the trade is fair.
4. If your dog makes an attempt to take the trade you offer him, praise him and gently toss the offering 1-2’ off to the side, which will encourage your dog to drop the item of value he currently possesses and go eat or get the trade item.
5. As your dog moves away from the object he has to eat the trade item, praise him and quietly pick up the item he had. Be sure to make no fast movements or otherwise startle your dog, as he is likely to abort the trade and decide that the item he originally had was more valuable.

When you set up trades for your dog, you never, ever want to lie to him. **If you present the cue, “Do you want to trade,” to your dog, you 100% of the time, need to follow up with a fair trade item.** Not doing so only teaches your dog that you are lying to him and that it’s not worth it for him to want trade with you. You never want your dog to feel the need to think twice about the trade situation you are presenting to him.

Over time, as you engage your dog more and more often in the trade game, your dog will begin to associate the cue, “Do you want to trade,” with your reliable and fair trades. He will soon begin to bring items he has found, or stolen, directly to you in the hopes that you will set up a trade, instead of running to another room, eating them or guarding them. **The trade game can be utilized regardless of what your dog guards.** If your dog is guarding a person or place, set up a trade situation where your dog finds it more valuable to move away from the object, person or place he is guarding to a more neutral area, defusing the aggressive situation.

How the Trade Game Prevents and Treats Resource Guarding

By setting up the reliable, non-confrontational, give and take of the trade game with your dog, you, overtime, change his emotional attachment to items he deems valuable. Rather than creating an environment where your dog feels threatened and that he must resort to violence to control his access to items of value, you create a mindset in your dog where it is reinforcing and highly valuable to defer and reorient to you whenever he comes across an item in your home, or the outside world, that he may want. Through the trade game, you teach your dog that bringing objects he has directly to you is more valuable, reinforcing and rewarding than guarding and aggressing over them. You implement a reliable, and very safe, way of creating situations where your dog enjoys, looks forward to, and actively seeks out your involvement in a very behaviorally acceptable manner whenever he comes across items of value.