

Guarding
by Marcia Albert

Although we spend a good deal of time discussing our dogs' food possessiveness, guarding can also occur when a dog has anything that he considers a prize. Sometimes we excuse his behavior. "Well, it's his toy." "As long as he's quiet, leave him alone." "It's just an old glove." Then Shep gets his teeth on the oldest, dirtiest, smelliest shoe in the house and "It's just an old shoe" becomes, "Oh, *&%*\$!! He's got my lucky pair of Puma's!!!! I've got a race on Saturday, GET HIM!!" The race is on, and my bet is usually on the dog. It's amazing how the laziest, most lethargic dog can suddenly turn into the fastest, nimblest creature on four legs. He teases and taunts with his version of Mega Bucks securely locked in his jaws as he stays just out of reach. Or you may know a dog who growls and snaps or freezes and stares when you approach one of his prized toys or treats. Whatever the situation, you don't have to live with a possessive dog.

Some dogs only guard one type of toy, such as a stuffy, or a favorite treat, perhaps rawhide. If that is the case a quick fix is to remove the one toy or treat that causes him to be on guard duty. If the object isn't available then he has nothing to protect.

You can teach your dog to trade objects. Do this before he eats so he has a good appetite. Children are not to do these exercises!

- Pick up his prized possessions and put them out of sight. Leave a few toys that he isn't particularly interested in, but he will put it in his mouth.
- When he is mouthing it, say "DROP" as you offer him a tempting treat.
- Once he takes the treat make certain to praise him and then you take the object. When he is done with the treat, give him the object. Again, praise him. **Please!!! You must return the object to the dog!** If he understands that he gave up a possession for something better and then was given his original toy he'll be much more receptive.
- Do this a few times.
- The last time you practice give him several treats in a row to really make an impression.

Now, during the day when you see that your dog has a toy repeat the process. Continue this for a few weeks. When you are certain he understands the command "DROP" you continue to use the praise, but very, very slowly wean him from a treat each time. Praise each time, but treat intermittently so he never knows when the treat is coming.

When he is doing this exercise nicely, introduce a higher value toy, but go slowly. As the value of his toys increase, he may become possessive so the treats must get more interesting. However, if he does growl, snap, freeze STOP immediately. Don't speak to him, don't grab the toy, don't hit him. Get up and leave. Patience is the name of this game. Put that toy away and return to less interesting toys.

Playing games with your dog is a great way to work on guarding. If he'll play fetch, get two identical toys. Toss one, and then when he plays hard to get by keeping the tossed toy in his mouth begin to show great interest in the toy you have. Walk away from him, toss it in the air, generally play the "Mine is better than yours" game we all fell for as kids. When he

drops his toy throw yours as far as you can and retrieve his original toy. Play this for a few sessions and then when he has the toy you want in his mouth, ask him to sit and toss your toy. Gradually, again remember patience, patience, patience, you'll be able to get him to drop his toy on command.

Avoid playing chase games or Keep Away with your dog. These games just reinforce guarding, plus we're not good at winning them. After Bowser's won game after game of Keep Away there's no way he'll respond to "DROP". Dogs love games of competition and power because they're good at them, but we need to have them play games of cooperation where we show them that we are the brains of the outfit.

Guarding or possessive behavior is difficult to correct because you can never be certain about what will set your dog off. You are ultimately responsible for your dog's actions so be careful of his interaction with other members of the family, children, strangers, other animals, etc. Remember, you must maintain his training by practicing these exercises for the rest of his life.