

Stop Taking My Stuff



There is one thing that can strike horror in the heart of a puppy owner....the sound of a growl. The first time you hear that low rumbling sound coming from your innocent pup it is almost a betrayal. After all, haven't we given them the best? We have treated them kindly, taken them for their daily walks and played with them for hours on end. What could they possibly have to growl at?

One of the most common experiences that dog owners share is that of object guarding. This is the moment that your dog has something that you want, and is not willing to give it up without a battle.

Reprimanding your dog after an incident of object guarding may make you feel better, and will perhaps stop the action for the moment, but will go a long way in making the overall situation more difficult.

Have you ever noticed that dogs that guard things almost always guard something that they have stolen? The stolen object may not seem to have much value. A sock or a Kleenex is most common. They will guard this treasure like it is gold bullion. If you look at it from the dog's perspective, it is quite obvious why this happens. If they are chewing on one of their own toys, you usually leave them alone. If you do happen to remove the toy, it is on a temporary basis. They get that toy back at a later date, and often he gets it back moments later.

A sock on the other hand is a different story. Each and every time they come to you with this newfound source of entertainment, you promptly take it from them. The speed of this object removal can be directly linked to our personal attachment to the object. We seem to move more quickly when they have our favorite pair of shoes!

Over time, our dogs simply get fed up with us, and decide to tell us to leave them alone. This comes in the form of a growl first and may escalate to a bite if not addressed properly. One thing is for sure, confrontation rarely works in the long run. Our response to dogs who have something we want is often to use a very negative tone. With a “No, drop it..drop it..drop it!” we chase them down. Many dogs end up in a corner or under a dining room table.

The lesson they have learned now is not to trust a person, and especially one chasing them. They become defensive and act out. The lesson that we had hoped to teach them – not to steal our things – is quickly lost in all the chaos. Let’s be very clear, it is not all right for dogs to growl or bite, but we need take a look at how best to rectify this problem.

First things first. We need to teach our pup how to drop objects on command. Start with an object that your pup does not ordinarily guard. One of his own toys will work well. Start with the toy in your hand and encourage your pup to chew one end. Have a tasty treat in one hand. Say “drop” and put the treat on his nose. As soon as he opens his mouth, pop the treat in and repeat the process by having him taking and dropping the toy a few times. Don’t get into a battle. If you are having difficulty at this initial stage, it is time to call in professional help.

Set up your situation to be successful. If your dog has a history of running away as soon as you approach, attach a dragline. This is a lightweight leash with the handle cut off. As soon as your dog starts to leave, you can simply step on the leash and voila...you have your dogs attention.

The first step as soon as you see your pup with a stolen object is to approach in a non-confrontational way. If you see Sparky carrying one of your socks (or worse, your undies during a dinner party!), approach with your body in a low position, almost stooped or crouched down. Make sure your side is to the front of your dog. Try not to face them head on. This will help your pup understand that you are not a threat.

Speak in a calm manner and take the sock in your hand and say “drop”. Have your treat ready to reward the drop. Take a good look at the sock and then...here it comes...give it back to them! This can be done a number of times and then finally the object will stay with you and not be returned to the dog. Of course, if the item is unsafe, you will not be returning it to your dog.

Giving the item back to your dog will help him understand that you are not there to confront him, or to give him heck. He will feel less stressed over the situation and will soon learn that he does not need to growl as soon as you approach. Let's make one thing very clear. We all know that our dog has to learn a lesson, learn not to touch our things. However, force and intimidation may make your dog more fearful, and then you have one more hurdle to face.

With that in mind, let's look at the other lesson your dog has to learn. He has to learn to trust you. In learning trust, he will also understand respect and that is a major key to solving many dog-related problems. He has to learn to let you remove things from him and sometimes he will get them back, and sometimes he won't. He has to learn not to bite or growl if anyone comes near him while he is chewing on a found item. This is especially important for dogs that live with children.

If we have to sacrifice a sock or two for the process that will eventually save our Prada shoes, that is the big lesson for the day. It is not giving in to the dog to teach them to relinquish all objects. By teaching trust you will teach a lesson that will serve both you and your dog plus embellish your relationship.