



Possessiveness: Teaching Dogs It's Okay to Share

by Ian Dunbar, Ph.D., MRCVS

"Ms. Malamute popped next door to borrow a cup of kibble from Ms. Maltese, faithfully promising, "I'll return it tomorrow, cross my "mutant heart!"

*"Yeah, I'll bet," retorted Ms. Maltese. "The kibble stays where it is, Mute-breath!"
It is quite natural for dogs to be protective of food, bones, and other valuables because experience has often taught them that if other dogs "borrow" or expropriate valuable possessions, they may never see them again.*

Top Dogs Do Share

Some dogs, however, are willing to share. Good buddies are often willing to share food bowls, toys, and bones. Also, true top dogs will frequently share their possessions. In one of our studies on the development of social hierarchies(1), the highest-ranking male dog was perfectly willing to share his bone with others, although only two middle-ranking females had the confidence to try. Completely confident the bone was his (as long as he maintained possession of the large, meaty end), the top dog was quite happy to let other dogs nibble away at the thin, bony end of the oxtail.

Feelings of possessiveness and protectiveness basically stem from insecurity, lack of trust and lack of socialization; it takes confidence to share. Building the dog's trust and confidence in a two-step process. It is not sufficient merely to teach dogs to tolerate the proximity and actions of people; in addition, we must also teach dogs to thoroughly enjoy the presence of people around their valued possessions, to relish people taking away their food bowls, bones, or toys, and especially to love human company at mealtimes. (It is worthwhile to say a few special words about bitches. Under prime hierarchical law, male dogs virtually always respect higher rank. Thus, once rank is established, protection and possession are moot issues, because ownership is decreed by rank. Bitches, however have penned an amendment to this primary rule: If I have it, it's mine! The amendment acknowledges possession as 9/10 of bitch law. Because puberty in bitches comes on like winter in Winnipeg, a female puppy can become possessive almost overnight.)

It is fun and virtually effortless to teach puppies to be trustworthy and tolerant around valued possessions. It is similarly easy to teach adult dogs. Preventative and therapeutic techniques are pretty much the same, but working with adult dogs takes much longer and can be dangerous. With either, however, always proceed slowly, progressively, and gently. Even with preventative work, maintain "safety first." If you even suspect the dog might nip, wear protective gloves, or muzzle the dog with an open-ended muzzle so he may take treats and eat, but cannot bite you. And never work alone. Apart from valuable moral support, an assistant can be on hand with a large plastic garbage bucket to plunk over the food bowl or bone at the slightest hint of things drifting off track.

When working with valued objects and bones, always tie them to a string. If the dog gets a bit growly,

the assistant can give a hearty tug, jerk the bone from the dog's mouth, and cover the object with the garbage can.

The Food Bowl

At meal times, most people put down the dog's bowl and then walk away. This habit all but trains dogs to become accustomed to eating alone, and most certainly increases the likelihood they might resent intrusions at a later date. Right from the outset, make a habit of sitting down on the floor to keep the dog company at mealtime. Hold the food bowl in your lap, and, as the dog methodically munches the same ol' kibble, occasionally handfeed the dog with a couple of liver treats or other favored treats. Once the dog appears to be completely at ease, plunge your hand (with treat) right into the dog's bowl. The dog will quickly learn to associate the owner's presence and hands with dinnertime presents. Already the dog might muse, "This never happens when I eat alone. I mean, I just did a nose scan and I swear there were 46 nuggets of kibble...kibble only, nary a treat, yet my owner just put his hand in my bowl and plucked out a piece of poultry! Good old owner. I love it when he joins me for dinner. "

If the dog has already developed some degree of antipathy toward human company at mealtimes, we have to employ a different tactic--the delinquent water routine. There are two types of waiters: the omnipresent, overly helpful, irritating, usually unnecessary and unwanted hovering waiter, and the delinquent waiter. Well, we are going to use the latter method on the dog and make it literally beg us to approach its food bowl. (For the sake of argument, let's use a bitch in this example, since bitches have established their own ownership rules.)

Sit for Your Supper

Measure out the dog's dinner and put it in a bowl on the counter. Instruct her to sit for her supper, put her regular food bowl on the floor and give the okay to eat. Make sure you have a video camera handy to record the expression on the dog's face: utter astonishment! You see, the dog's food is in the bowl on the counter; the bowl on the floor is empty. Perhaps ask your dog, "Everything to your liking, Ma'am?" She will certainly be beside herself in a now uncertain anticipation of dinner, imploring, "Yo! Owner, get over here with my food!"

Yes, that's right...get over to my food bowl. So now the dog wants you to approach her food bowl. Although there's nothing in the bowl for her to protect, it's a good start at least. But because there is nothing to protect, she has no reason to get upset, and so we are "forcing" her to succeed. Now, walk up to the dog, have her sit, and toss a single kibble into the bowl, tell her to eat and then walk away. Ssshllurpp! Gone. Just like that. "Is that all?" she asks. "Get back over here with more!" Well this must be a record. Twice in one evening, the possessive dog has begged us to approach her food bowl. Keep feeding similar small installments, a multiple course dinner tonight with lots and lots of itchy-bitsy starters. In no time, she will eagerly anticipate your approach and company because it signals yet another yummy course.

Now it's time for the entree. Put a whole handful of kibble into the bowl, but, before telling the dog to eat, hand-feed a special treat, then another and another. Hold the bowl with one hand and continue hand-feeding extremely tasty treats with the other while she is eating the relatively boring kibble from her bowl.

When you are completely confident she is confident with our presence and actions, pull out a really tasty treat, let go of the bowl for just an instant and ten simultaneously offer the treat with one hand and take hold of the bowl with the other. This is a crucial juncture: while you maintain hold of the bowl, the bitch views it as yours, but the instant you let it go, it becomes hers, so she might object if you try to take hold of her bowl again. Repeat this over and over, letting go of the bowl for progressively longer periods of time with each successive trial. The bitch is beginning to learn that human hands come to give, not necessarily to take away.

Once the bitch is completely at ease with human hands reaching out for her bowl, it is time to teach her that Occasionally human hands do take away. While she is enjoying a chewy treat held in one hand, say "Thank you," and gently remove the bowl of kibble with the other hand. Quickly add a dollop of scrumptious stuff and replace the bowl on the floor. "Ahh! That's why my owner wanted the bowl." The dog learns it does not necessarily lose food by letting the owner take the bowl away. On the contrary, the food gets better!

Bones and Toys

Practice taking away bones, toys and other objects from a dog before the inevitable incident with that essential floppy disk or aromatic (sic) TV dinner. Offer the dog a boring toy, something not a favorite. Once the dog has grudgingly accepted the toy, say, "Thank you," offer a tasty treat with one hand and take the toy with the other. Once the dog has eaten the treat, give back the toy, saying "Take it." Repeat this with more valued objects, such as balls, squeakies, and Kongs, moving up to very valued objects, bones. When working with more highly valued objects, the attractiveness of the treats must increase accordingly, so that no matter how valuable the object the dog has in its jaws, you always have more valuable and tastier treats in your paws. A dog must develop the confidence that giving up a valued toy of bone does not necessarily mean it's the last of it he ever sees. On the contrary, the dog learns, "Thank you," means the owner wants to look after the dog's toy (how considerate!) while the dog eats the tasty treat (how generous!) and then, the owner wants to return the dog's toy (how honorable!)

Now, of course, Ms. Malamute might muse, "How incredibly and utterly stupid! The owner swaps a moth-eaten old tennis ball for a liver treat, and then the dummy gives it back to me! Boy he's stupid, but I love sharing!"

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(1) Beach, F.A., Buehler, M.G., and Dunbar, I.F. 1982. "Competitive Behavior in Male, Female, and Pseudo hermaphroditic Female Dogs." *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*. Volume 96, Number 6, pp. 855-874.

