

Hey! This is MY toy!
by Jill Miller, CDPT
Mad City Dog Training



Please keep in mind that this article is written to supplement information given by a trainer, or to give a family a starting point for working with their dog while looking for a trainer that they feel comfortable working with. Any time a dog is showing aggression of any type, it needs to be seen in person by someone who is familiar and comfortable working with aggressive dogs. There are too many nuances that simply cannot be covered in one training article.

Many of us know, or even own, a dog that is beautiful with every other dog, unless there are toys around. These possession issues toward other dogs can be really, really tough to deal with. It's this kind of behavior that's kept dogs alive as long as they have been - the pushiest dog gets the most food, has the most strength to do the most breeding, etc. In most cases, management is the easiest and most effective way to deal with possession issues. The dog can have the rawhides and toys that he likes, but he can only have them in his crate or when he's off somewhere by himself, away from other animals and unsuspecting humans.

Sometimes management isn't enough or you feel that modifying the dog's behavior would be a wise safety measure. One thing you can try, if you feel that you trust your dog and are willing to take a possible risk, is to tether "Snarls" to something sturdy with a leash (or crate him) with a good, but not absolute favorite, toy. One adult should sit next to Snarls and have someone walk another dog near him. At first the other dog should be far enough away that Snarls won't react to her at all. Every time the dog walks past Snarls, give him a wonderful treat like summer sausage or deli roast beef or something equally wonderful. Do this even if Snarls shows a negative reaction - our goal is to change Snarls' mind from "I must take this dog out before she gets my toy" to "Oh look, there's that dog. I don't mind her because I get treats when she walks by." You are also not correcting Snarls if he has a negative reaction. This can cause Snarls to make the connection between the other dog showing up and getting into trouble, which will make him that much more likely to try to get rid of the other dog as soon as possible. If Snarls' reaction is completely inappropriate, too scary, or you just don't want to deal with him any more at the moment, tell him "time out" in a matter-of-fact tone of voice and put him in a crate or separate room so *you* can cool off for a bit. Always remember to try to end training sessions on a positive note.

When Snarls is pretty relaxed and happy about having a dog that close to him, walk the other dog a couple of feet closer, still heavily rewarding whenever she's near him. You can move onto the next step, getting the other dog closer to Snarls, when he's able to relax and anticipate your treating him at the current distance. If Snarls ever lets the other dog get all the way next to him with a sort-of-fun toy, start over from the beginning with a higher value toy. This will probably take several days, if not weeks, and your dog might decide that no reward is worth the possibility of him losing a valued resource. *If this training exercise is done, PLEASE use caution!!! I suggest that you tether or crate your dog because if he gets stressed, he might decide to go after the other dog or displace his*



frustration and go after you. It's probably not very likely that you'd get bitten, but it's something to be aware of. Know that if you're pushing the dog to the point that he's barking, growling, and/or snapping, you've pushed the dog too far and you need to ease up on your criteria.

Patricia McConnell in one of her books, either *How to be the Leader of the Pack* or *Feeling Out Numbered?*, describes a leadership exercise that she does with her dogs. Once again, you should consider tethering Snarls, and possibly the other dog, if Snarls has ever snapped at or attacked the other dog over a valued possession. If the other dog is tethered, she should be tethered closely enough to Snarls that you can easily reach both dogs, but not closely enough that the dogs can touch. Having someone hold the other dog's leash will work if there is no way to tether both dogs.

Take something like a spoon with peanut butter or a pan with meat drippings (McConnell shows a video where she does this with the pan she baked a rack of lamb in). Stand between the dogs. Offer the goodie to one dog saying "Snarls, take it". After a couple of moments, say "Snarls, leave it" and take the goodie away from him and immediately give it to the other dog, telling her to take it. (This works best if the dogs already have an off or leave it command, telling them to back away from whatever it is they were going to eat or investigate.) Then tell the other dog to leave it and give it back to Snarls. The idea behind it is to tell the dogs that they can have whatever you give them, on YOUR terms, not theirs. I recommend both books to anyone whether your dog is showing possession issues or not.

Jean Donaldson also has a book out called *Mine!*. It talks about possession issues, although mostly dealing with acting out toward humans and not other dogs. This book is written more toward a professional trainer audience and not the average pet owner, but it still might be helpful, especially if you are working with a professional trainer.



While working with a trainer, teaching your dog to "give" or "trade" would be a good idea. Start with low value items and really good treats, show him the treat and give him the command as he spits out the toy. (*Give, trade, and out* are common commands, but you can use whatever you want, just be consistent.) When he's readily spitting out the toy for food, give him the command first, without showing any food, but rewarding after he gives up the toy. Then take a slightly more interesting toy and start from the beginning again. If your dog is not food motivated, you may need to get identical toys, or reward with a toy that is as favored as the one the dog has in his mouth. You always want to make it really easy for the dog to begin with, then when it gets harder, lower the expectations you have. Keep in mind you should be able to raise your expectations back up fairly quickly. By following these baby steps, the dog can feel more confident and successful, which in turn makes the dog more receptive to learning the new command.

Possession issues are a totally normal facet of dog behavior. However, when dogs live with people, these issues need to be dealt with to make the situation safe for everyone involved. Management is necessary, behavior modification is often possible, but regardless, a competent dog trainer should be employed to help you deal with these issues.