

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

The Trading Protocol
for Prevention and Treatment of Resource Guarding in Dogs

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Resource Guarding is a perfectly natural behavior for dogs, and can serve a valuable purpose if they are feral, living on their own, and having to find and protect food, sleeping areas, their puppies, and themselves from harm. The dogs we live with and the dogs we rescue have no need to guard their resources, but they don't always know that. A dog can become dangerous when Resource Guarding goes awry or is taken to a higher level. We see this so often with our rescues: sometimes they were raised in sub-standard situations, did not learn the foundation behaviors necessary for dogs to live productively in homes with humans, and sometimes they even lived in a group of dogs with little human supervision and fewer resources than necessary, resulting in their developing Resource Guarding behaviors that they bring with them into their new lives. Resource Guarding is a common basis for aggressive behavior in dogs English Springer Rescue America takes in. In their view, they're just trying to hold onto things they like; but they bite people in order to do so and that can lead to a very bad ending to what could have been a really nice rescue story.

It's best to start every dog off by working to prevent Resource Guarding behaviors before you even see them occur. I like to begin teaching every dog I meet that I am no threat to them, I will always offer them something in trade for anything they have, and that I will not be so rude as to try to snatch things away from them.

When we've just met a dog, we don't know him any better than he knows us. We don't know if he's ever met a person like ourselves: deep-voiced, hat-wearing, high-energy or slow and lumbering; having good or poor dog interaction skills; responsive to the dog's communications or not; tall or short, fat or thin, dark-skinned or light. We don't even know if he's met very many people before at all. We certainly don't know how anyone he's met has behaved toward him, or what habits he's developed in interacting with humans. It's best to be polite as we get to know him, just as we would toward a human we've just met. To a dog, that means allowing him to approach us rather than approaching him first, dropping a slip lead over his head rather than grabbing for his collar, and asking him if he'd like to trade what he has in his mouth for a super-yummy treat.

When a dog has something in his mouth, a chewie, a bone, a toy, a stick, a dead bird, or whatever else he deems valuable enough to hold onto, we must offer something even more valuable to him if we want him to choose to drop that item. That may sometimes mean simply a piece of kibble, especially if it's offered in the right way. ([***See Note about adding value to treats.](#)) Some situations call for an especially good-tasting dog treat. In the case of a dead bird with some dogs, you may need a bite of steak; a dead bird can be quite a treasure if you're a canine!

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To offer a trade to a dog, simply hold a small piece of food that you're sure he will like just in front of his nose while he's holding the item you'd like him to drop. Chances are that he'll smell the treat and open his mouth to eat it, and guess what? Whatever he had in his mouth will fall out onto the floor! This is the point at which you should be careful to try to hold onto the treat as he nibbles it, or to have a few treats in your hand and roll them into your fingers one at a time, feeding him the whole time you reach for and pick up the dropped item. The goal is to keep the dog relaxed and comfortable the entire time, never feeling threatened or thinking that he needs to defend himself or his precious treasure from you. If you were reading a magazine, you wouldn't want anyone to snatch it out of your hands, would you? If someone put his hands on something you had, you'd be likely to pull it back from them. We don't want to put a dog in that position, especially one we barely know. With a new dog, watch him closely as you feed him and reach for the dropped item; this is a time when he might surprise you by snapping as you grab the item. Lure his face over to one side, away from the dropped treasure, while you feed him and pick up the item. We're distracting him, but we're also keeping him happily eating rather than worried about what he might be losing; thus, we're setting him up for the next time he has something in his mouth that we want. Preventing a bad experience for the dog and yourself is much better than allowing it to happen and then trying to fix it.

We certainly want to practice this behavior many times with a new dog, in order to help him develop a habit of happily releasing anything we ask for. We don't want to do it over and over and over on his first day in our home, though. Do it once or twice that first day, giving the new dog a chance to enjoy a bone or chewie for a while, safely in his crate. Practice this exercise each day. You can increase the number of times you do it each day, and the number of times you do it during each practice session, as time goes on. You will begin to see your dog release items more readily, you'll see him begin bringing his treasures closer to you, and ultimately he'll begin bringing things to you, perhaps dropping them at your feet, looking to you for a treat. As this behavior develops, you can begin adding a cue like "Drop it" or "Give" or one I like, "Thank you," saying the words just as the dog is dropping the item. Begin holding your hand under his mouth to catch the item and later, ask him to get the item a second time if it drops on the floor instead of in your hand. Once he's reliably dropping things in your hand, begin moving your hand upward a bit at a time and you'll have him delivering things to your hand up in your lap in no time! Be sure to give him his treat every time; just ask the tiniest bit more of him with each repetition of the behavior. This is just how you train a solid retrieve for a service dog, hunting dog, or competition dog; and it's just that easy. But the most important thing is that he's learning how great it is to give you things he has.

One of my favorite things to do with the "Trading Protocol" is to catch a moment when my dog has a toy, ask him to give it to me, give him a treat, and pretend to examine the item to see if it's good enough for him to play with. I'll even say things about it like, "Only the best for Angus! Let me check it out – is this a good toy?" as I look it over. Then I give it back, saying, "I think it's good enough. Here you go!" It's light-hearted and fun, it teaches a good lesson, and my dog gets a double reinforcement – a treat plus he gets his toy back! This is great preparation for those moments when you need to get something from your dog and you really can't give it back

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– those dead bird moments – because when he gives you something, you might just give it back. Probably not a dead bird, though, but he doesn't know that.

The most important reason to trade dogs treats for other items is to prevent them from developing that behavior we've seen in rescue all too often: taking an item, lying down with it and threatening anyone who comes near, whether or not they're planning to take the item away. Always respect a dog's threat, because he's not kidding. A growl means, "I feel threatened. I don't really want to bite you, but I will if I need to. Please change this situation." A growl is your cue to take the pressure off, defuse the situation. Take the dog, yourself, someone else, or another dog out of that picture so that the threatened dog feels better. It's also something to take note of: put the "Trading Protocol" into action with this dog. But give him a chance to cool down before doing so. You want to start with the dog relaxed and comfortable, secure and not feeling threatened. Keep him in that frame of mind throughout your training session. We want him to learn to enjoy that relaxed feeling that comes over him while eating those yummy treats and learning not to feel threatened.

Remember that some of the dogs we rescue already have a strong habit of feeling threatened in these situations, and don't feel inadequate if you can't change that right away. Revel in the joy of seeing dogs improve quickly when they do and know for sure that even when you don't see immediate improvement, the dog is learning and the behavior is improving, even if at a level you can barely see. Just do your part to prevent Resource Guarding behavior from getting worse.

Practice this with puppies when you're lucky enough to get them, in order to prevent Resource Guarding from ever developing.

There are certainly other things that dogs consider resources worth guarding, like couches, beds, rooms, doorways, dog beds, food or water bowls, their own bodies/personal space, and even people. I think teaching dogs the "Trading Protocol" helps in these areas too, because it begins teaching them that there's abundance in their lives; there's plenty of stuff for them, plenty of food, and plenty of room, so there's no need to guard anything. The lesson is, "I know you like that thing you have, and I might let you keep it sometimes. But if I can't let you keep that item, I'll make sure you get something just as good or better."

*****Note:** As we continue with a dog's training, by offering treats in the same way each time, he will begin to understand holding your hand in just that position as a cue that he'll be getting a treat; so holding your hand in that way becomes a bit of a reinforcement or reward on its own. Then when the dog gets the treat, it's already more valuable than it would have been based on just its taste and food value. Holding your hand in that particular position is a "marker" for the dog; because it leads to a yummy treat, it becomes a conditioned reward – one that if it's always followed by the treat, reinforces the dog's behavior in and of itself. Combined with this now-conditioned hand position, of holding your hand in that position, even a piece of kibble is a pretty good reward. Think of how a clicker extends the reinforcement process, letting the dog know he's about to get a treat – your hand in a certain position can be the same type of stimulus. The reinforcement begins when your hand appears, and continues through the time the dog is chewing and swallowing the treat. I generally offer treats to my own dogs between the tips of my thumb and forefinger. I'll sometimes present them to a new dog on my flat palm.