

I adopted a rescue Pomeranian dog 5 years ago. He does not know how to retrieve a toy. When he gets a toy and you try to take it away from him he growls and semi-attacks as if he would bite. How do I correct this bad habit?

The situation you are describing is referred to as “resource guarding”. In these instances, dogs will growl and snap when approached while eating, playing with or chewing a toy, eating or lying in a favorite spot. These dogs are guarding what they consider to be a valuable resource. This is a normal behavior but is dangerous when it goes too far.

A good place to start is with basic obedience. Your dog should know to sit and stay on command. He should also know to come when called and look to you for permission before certain activities. The “nothing in life is free” protocol should be implemented, requiring your dog to sit and wait patiently before receiving what he wants. It is also important to teach him to back away from the object that you want. If it is safe to do, say “Back”, walk toward your dog and shuffle your feet into him (without kicking) until he moves then praise him. Most dogs will back up just with you stepping towards them. Starting to work on these basics will lay the foundation for working on advanced behaviors.

The next step to changing the behavior is by teaching him to trade. When you want to take the object from your dog, offer something else in exchange with the command “Trade”. This can be done with a piece of kibble, a small treat or a yummy piece of cheese. The goal is to use something that he likes even more than the object you are trying to take. He’ll learn that if he drops the toy when asked, he’ll get rewarded with something better. Always remember that once something is in your dog's mouth, it is not safe to take it out. It is too late at this point.

By working on basic behavior with your dog, teaching him to trade object with you and having him spit out an object and back up will help him learn to give objects up for play. Don’t expect to fix the problem overnight. It is something you will need to work for a few minutes every day before you see progress. It is important to read his cues and stop if you are think he might bite. A video or picture taken to show his actions will also help your veterinarian interpret the behavior and make the best suggestions for you.

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