

The difference between a PROTECTIVE dog and a POSSESSIVE dog

As a trainer, I see a lot of different dogs and dog behavior. One very common misconception that I see is someone considering their possessive dog to be “protecting” them from other people or other dogs. I’ve even heard other trainers saying this. Unfortunately words have power, and many people consider a dog “protecting” them to be a good thing. However, most of these dogs are not actually protecting their owners, but rather being possessive of them, which is not a good social trait to have. The wording makes all of the difference, so in order to clear up the confusion, here is a rundown of the difference between “Protective” dogs and “Possessive” dogs and some tips to reducing or extinguishing possessive behavior.

Protective.

Many people like to think that man’s best friend will loyally defend them if they are in danger. Many dogs will, and there are many stories of dogs doing just that. A “Protective” dog is confident. He will keep an eye on the surroundings and his human(s). He may or may not be overtly friendly with other people, but he does not show aggressive behaviors towards people in normal social situations. A protective dog will not step in unless the situation demands it either through a command from his owner, a fear response to a certain person or other dog by his owner, or a threatening manner by the approaching person or dog. Usually, a protective dog will only show as much threatening behavior as necessary to resolve the situation and will not attack/bite except in extreme circumstances. They may increase their presence in unknown situations by moving closer to their human or placing themselves between their human and the unknown situation, but will not otherwise interfere unless the situation escalates into one of the three categories above. While having a dog willing to protect you can definitely be a good thing and a good trait to have, too much protectiveness can be a bad thing, especially when paired with a person that is fearful of other dogs or strangers since it may kick the dog’s protectiveness into overdrive and cause unwanted and unwarranted altercations.

Possessive (aka Resource Guarding).

A “Possessive” dog thinks of the human as HIS property, and will become territorial about their person at the approach of any other person or dog, sometimes even if they know that other person or dog well and interact with it well when away from the owner. They do not want anything else interacting with their person, even in a friendly manner, because, well, it is HIS. A possessive dog may growl, bark, nip at, or even go into a full on attack when another person or dog tries to greet HIS person, even if they are approaching in a friendly manner and the owner is happy and eager to greet the incoming person/dog. Most possessive dogs are insecure. They are worried that if other things come by their stuff, including their person, then it will get taken away or will have to be shared. Possessiveness is considered an antisocial behavior because it prevents the dog from interacting positively with other people and animals when around HIS things. This possessiveness is often unwanted by the owner, but because they think of it as “protective”, they feel they should like the behavior and rarely seek professional assistance in resolving the behavior, even though this is technically the same behavior as

when a dog is aggressive around food or toys and definitely SHOULD be extinguished. Confidence building and sharing exercises can help resolve some possessive behavior, but many times professional help is needed due to the fact that insecurity is often cultivated unknowingly by the owner.

Tips to Resolve Possessive/Resource Guarding Issues

Basic Facts of “Possessive of People” Dog

- Possessive issues are fairly common in rescue dogs, who have had their things and people taken away often. They don't want to lose their stuff and so they fight to hold onto it. They don't realize that now they are in a permanent, good environment where they will get to have their food, toys, and people as long as they live.
- The dog is using the owner as a base and fuel for their antisocial behavior.
- Any attention toward the dog by the object of his possession will only reward and fuel the behavior further
- The dog needs to make the association that possessive behavior is unwelcome
- Tension in the owner makes this behavior worse
- Tension in the person or dog attempting to greet the owner will trigger an escalation of aggression

Resolving the issue

- As stated above, generally professional help should be sought for any dog that will BITE something approaching the object of his possession. It is a good idea to have an in-person assessment done by a reputable trainer.
- Be CALM and POSITIVE. Your dog will pick up on any negative feelings you have, which will make it much harder to extinguish the behavior or make any progress in training. We sweat continuously and dogs can smell the difference in pheromones and other chemicals that change as well as subtle changes in muscle tension and body posture or vocal tension that occurs when we are stressed out. If you cannot be calm and positive during these exercises, do NOT work on them. Wait until you can be. If you fear your dog will hurt someone, positively condition them to a muzzle so that the danger of them causing damage is removed from the situation so that YOU can be calm.
- Know the subtle signs that your dog is beginning his antisocial behavior which may include but is not limited to:
 - Stiffening of body posture, especially legs, tail, and neck
 - Hackles (fur on back of neck and rump) up
 - Growling
 - Intense staring
- Find the dog's “**Threshold**” for possessive behavior. This is done by slowly moving the dog/person your dog becomes antisocial towards (known as the “**Target**”) in his direction until the dog starts showing the first signs of antisocial behavior. Once you have the threshold, you will know how far away the dog needs to be to be able to exhibit “good” behavior so that you can get his attention and reward him for that good behavior.

- Gradually lower the Threshold distance by consistently practicing and rewarding him for good behavior (such as practicing basic obedience or tricks) as you slowly bring the Target closer. If the dog starts ignoring you and focusing negatively towards the Target, move the Target back away and try again. This can take some time and should be practiced regularly (at least 2-3x per week if not every day).
- DO NOT touch, comfort, or try to calm your dog, especially saying things like “it’s ok!” to the dog while they are exhibiting the antisocial behaviors! This just rewards the dog for exhibiting those behaviors and teaches the dog that “it’s ok” to be antisocial! Only reward the dog when they are being neutral or friendly towards the Target or are ignoring the target and have their attention on you!
- Since the possessive issue is fueled by the owner, the best way to remove the behavior is to remove the owner. If your dog becomes possessive of you, leave your dog with an **“Incorrect Behavior Marker”**. This is a word that tells the dog you do not approve of his behavior such as “uh-uh”, “wrong”, or “no”. It should be given in a calm voice and never yelled at the dog or paired with a physical correction. This is NOT a punishment! It is merely information for your dog that you don’t approve. Moving away can be as simple as turning and walking in the opposite direction to the length of your leash removing all of your attention and presence from him that is fueling the behavior. Or, if in your home, leaving the room or walking to the other side of it works. DO NOT reward the dog if he is still focused on the target but follows you. He is using you as a power base to fuel his insecure negativity and doesn’t want to be away from that power. This is easiest to do in a private, enclosed setting and should be practiced regularly so that your dog makes the association that when they become possessive of you, they lose your presence.
- NEVER punish the dog physically or get harsh with the dog when he is exhibiting possessive behavior! All he learns from that is that when other dogs/people approach, you get mad and bad things happen. This may cause the behavior to become WORSE as the dog gains a more and more negative view of approaching people and dogs! We want the dog to learn to enjoy meeting other people and dogs!
- Reward all neutral and positive interactions between your dog and other dogs/people at all times by praising him, especially if that person or dog has been a Target in the past. He will learn that you like it when he is being social, and paired with your removal when he is anti-social, will learn what behaviors cause him to get your attention and praise.
- Teach the dog a strong **“Leave It”** command. Once the dog has a strong response to the command, start using it in situations where the dog would normally become possessive. Reward the dog if he ignores the target he would normally show antisocial behavior towards. This is called **“Honoring”** and is a later stage addition to the Threshold training.