

Owner Guarding - "Jealous" Behavior

Dogs often show what we would label "jealously" when they are with us. This behavior, which may become aggressive at times, is often directed towards other beings (humans or other animals) that get too close to you. They simply do not want to share your attention. There are other reasons why dogs show this behavior however and you must try to identify the underlying motivation if you are to handle it properly. The other reasons include "protective" behavior (a form of resource guarding) or fear. Dogs who are fearful garner some "bravery" when they are with you and can become more assertive about chasing off the scary person or dog. If you think your dog is just showing good ole fashion "jealousy" then follow the instructions below. If there is another motivation it should be handled differently.

Your response to jealous behavior is very important. If you sooth your dog by saying things like "It's okay Sugar - she's a nice lady" then you may be inadvertently reinforcing the behavior. Your dog thinks you like when she acts like that. Conversely, if you yell at or physically punish her for acting aggressively when a person or another dog comes close you are helping to form an even more negative association - 'I hate when that dog comes close - and now I hate him even more because when he comes close I get in trouble'.

The proper response to jealous behavior is for you, the object of the jealousy, to get up and leave the room as a consequence of the behavior. Because dogs learn through the consequence of their behaviors (if the behavior is rewarded it will continue - if it is ignored it will go away) this is the most effective response. What you are doing is saying to the dog - when you become jealous and act out aggressively to someone in my presence I will leave (this is obviously not what the dog wants to happen). Simply say "too bad" and get up and leave the room.

If your dog is exhibiting aggression in these situations you should tether him/her during times when you expect people or other dogs to come close. Put his/her leash on and hook the handle end onto something like a chair leg. This way when you get up and leave the room, he/she cannot follow you or go after the other person or dog. Repeat this over and over until your dog realizes that it is his/her own aggressive behavior that is causing you to leave.

In addition to this response you also want to reward your dog for not acting aggressively when a person or dog comes close. Have treats ready and when he/she acts appropriately - say "good dog" (or click) and give the treat. By doing this, you will be slowly counterconditioning your dog to not only act differently when people or dogs approach, but also to feel differently. Now people or other dogs coming close predict good things and your dog will be happy about it.