

Article 28

Playing and biting there is a difference

Dear Gus,

I have a couple of questions about my 6-month-old Golden Retriever. We purchased him from what we thought was a reputable breeder, but it turns out he came from a puppy mill. We took "Riley" to puppy obedience classes already; however, we are having a lot of problems with aggression, particularly when he gets something he is not supposed to have. He doesn't guard his food, it seems to be random items such as socks, towels, etc. He guards it, and has bitten several times.

I was wondering if you have experience with this type of behavior. Also if you think this is trainable or just part of his nature. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Bill

Bill, this is a very interesting question that I hear quite frequently. First off, aggression is definitely not typical behavior for a Golden Retriever, or for any dog for that matter. I also don't believe that this is a result of your dog's background from a puppy mill although that could be a contributing factor, in that he may have been poorly socialized.

However, aggression and guarding are typically an environmental problem, in that the dog doesn't know the difference between a newfound prized object (stolen chicken or a stolen sock and dog food), other than the stolen chicken tastes better. This behavior probably didn't start overnight, and will not disappear overnight and should be treated as an obedience problem.

Most likely the first time this type of behavior occurred, you ignored it and may have even reinforced it by giving the puppy positive attention, thinking it was being cute, or even flattered that he brought a sock (which would have your scent on it) to you. You may have gotten into a tug of war with him while trying to take away the sock or towel, which he saw as a game and the behavior was reinforced. And since dogs are masters at reading body language and nonverbal communication, stealing became a learned behavior.

Now to stop this behavior you need to back up a few steps and make sure your dog understands what is acceptable behavior and that you are the leader. Start with crating your puppy, so he doesn't have the opportunity to "steal" socks or towels. Work with him on your basic commands, including "No" which will mean "Stop whatever it is you are doing," such as picking up the sock. When he is not in the crate, he should be under your command. Keep the leash on him when he is out of his crate, and make sure you don't tempt him by having these inviting things in his reach. If he does get one of these forbidden items you can immediately correct him with a stern "No."

When he drops the item, give him plenty of praise. At six months old; your puppy should know the difference between playing and biting, so this needs to stop immediately before it snowballs into a very serious problem that puts your puppy at risk and make sure you don't tempt him by having these inviting things in his reach.

I hope this helps Bill.

Gus
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