

TIER 2: PROTOCOL FOR DESENSITIZING AND COUNTER-CONDITIONING DOGS TO RELINQUISH OBJECTS

Some dogs have difficulty relinquishing objects about which they care. These objects can range from bones, whose value people can generally appreciate, to seemingly illogical objects like seeds harvested outside that the dog brings into the house. All dogs should be able to relinquish their possessions to their people upon request. This is a sign that the dog is willing to take information from his people, and it is a behavior that could save the dog's life someday if the object that he is fiercely protecting can hurt him. People should also be reasonable in their requests. This means that if we offer our dogs a giant knuckle bone, we shouldn't take it just because we can. And, if the dog is really aroused, no matter what he has, if it is not going to kill him now, we may want to just let him have it rather than contribute to worsening his aggression or getting anyone injured. Of course, this behavior modification protocol was designed with exactly the latter dog in mind.

Choose Your Coping Strategy

There are three strategies for dealing with a dog who exhibits possessive aggression and guards objects:

- Teach the dog that he does not have to worry about the object and can relinquish it freely **upon request**. This is the focus of this protocol.
- Omit the object(s) that trigger the possessive aggression from the dog's repertoire. If you choose to do this, and this is a perfectly rational choice, you have to ensure that you are consistent. This means that the object that the dog guards is truly and forever out of his repertoire. For dogs who are aggressive if given a bone, a form of food-related aggression, reasonable management may mean that the dog never experiences a bone.
- If you do not wish to avoid objects that the dog guards, or to teach him not to do so, you can only be kept safe by ignoring the dog when these objects are present. *This is a perfectly acceptable strategy if you can really do it, but most dogs are too worried about their objects to make this strategy practical.*

Remember that the goals of this program are twofold:

- You want to decrease your dog's anxiety if he is inappropriately protecting an object; by doing this we hope that your dog will learn that he does not have to guard the object.
- You want to minimize any danger to any person who may come in contact with your dog when he has an object he might protect. When dogs learn to behave appropriately, they become safer.

What Do You Need to Begin?

Prior to starting this tier of the behavior modification programs, all dogs should have successfully completed the **Protocol for Deference**, the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**, and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**. Unless your dog has been able to calmly and happily complete these programs, she will be unable to complete this one.

To begin the tasks in this protocol, select an object in which the dog has no interest, such as a paperweight or a rock from outdoors. The object should have no value to your dog and should not frighten her.

Working Through This Protocol

Ask your dog to sit and stay, or to lie down and stay, and relax, and then place the object about 2 to 3 meters (6.5 to 10 feet) from her so that she can see it. Reward the dog for relaxing.

Instruct your dog to "stay" ("Stay, be a good girl, stay, good girl.") and then pick up and quickly return the object.

Return to your dog and reward her if she relaxed and didn't move.

Continue to pick up and replace the object, moving it progressively closer to your dog in a very gradual manner. Each time you pick up and replace the object remember to return to your dog and reward her if she is calm and relaxed (see the Task Sheets below).

What If the Dog Grabs the Object?

If at any point your dog picks up the object, ask her to "drop it." This is a request that all puppies should learn, and you can use this protocol to teach it to puppies. If your dog drops the object, tell her that she is good. Ask her to wait 5 to 10 seconds, and then reward her with a food treat when she is looking at you. This pattern will encourage her to look to you for instructions about how she should handle the object while not encouraging her to steal objects to get attention.

If your dog is unable or unwilling to drop the object after a second request, ignore her and walk away from her and the object. She will seek you out. When she does so, ask her to sit, and practice some of the exercises from the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1** without using any objects. This will remind her that your relationship is not adversarial and that behavior modification can be fun. Then start with the tasks in this protocol, again.

You may feel safer if you use a head collar to work with your dog. If your dog is wearing a head collar and she tries to grab you or the object, you can safely and kindly interrupt her, while continuing to reward her, when appropriate, for relaxing while sitting or lying down. If you are at all concerned about your ability to take an object directly from your dog, you should use a head collar for the first round of these exercises.

After your dog is able to sit quietly and relax even if the object is picked up from directly in front of her, select a different item with which to work. This next object should be one about which the dog cares slightly more than she did the first object. Repeat the entire protocol as listed in the task pages using this new object.

Then continue to repeat all of the tasks, sequentially selecting an item that is progressively more interesting to your dog until you get to the objects that you know have triggered a protective response in the past.

Finally, if your dog is able to go through the entire protocol and appear relaxed and happy when you pick up even the

most valued of her items, you may wish to start to teach her “take it–drop it.” This is another exercise that all puppies should learn. Again, start with objects in which your dog has a mild interest (e.g., a “broken” squeak toy that has no squeak) and proceed to objects in which your dog has a keen interest (e.g., a rope toy).

Consider using rawhides or real bones if, and only if, your dog is not aggressive around food. Teaching dogs who are aggressive to food to relinquish it is hard and may be risky. Think seriously about whether this is your best choice. Consult the **Protocol for Understanding and Managing Dogs with Aggression Involving and Food, Rawhide, Biscuits, and Bones** to help you make your choice.

It is ideal to start puppies out by teaching them to relinquish rawhides, but if you begin to have problems with aggression, please talk to your veterinarian. It is always safer to deny dogs rawhides and real bones. Your dog will not be deprived if you do so.

Finally, remember that this protocol is an extension of the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**. Everything that you learned about body language and non-verbal cues applies here, also. Remember that distressed dogs cannot learn or focus and may shake, tremble, whine, salivate, move their eyes from side to side, et cetera. For these protocols to work best, it is not sufficient that your dog just sits and stays. She must be relaxed while doing so. Dogs who learn to enjoy the exercises will progress at the fastest rate. If at any point your dog continues to have difficulty with the tasks, divide them into smaller units and continue. If your dog works best for three 5-minute periods, instead of one 15-minute period, use the shorter periods.

Anti-anxiety medications may help some dogs who otherwise are not able to succeed in this program. Please remember that if it’s decided that medication could benefit your dog, you need to use it **in addition** to the behavior modification, not instead of it.

Task Sheet Instructions

These tasks are meant to give you guidance, only. They are designed to use very, very, very gradual changes. Such tiny steps allow you to reward aspects of the behaviors that are good, without accidentally rewarding aspects of behaviors that are not so good.

Built into these programs are the concepts of desensitization (DS), where you teach the dog not to react to some situation by exposing him to the situation at a level below that needed to have him react and become distressed, and counter-conditioning (CC), where you reward behaviors that are in direct opposition or contrast to those that are undesirable.

If you open any applied psychology text or article on learning, you will see similar programs. There is nothing magic or novel or original here; these tasks are those that are common to most dog and cat training and behavior modification programs, and you will see similar task sheets in a number of books, articles, and online sources.

Please remember that what *is different here* is that you are rewarding the physical signs that the dog is less distressed or worried. You are rewarding *only* relaxed behaviors (review the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**).

The tasks involve only common situations in which your dog may respond inappropriately or undesirably. Some of these situations may not be relevant to you, and others that are relevant may be missing. Please feel free to customize or alter this program, but please do so using the pattern of approach used here (i.e., gradually work up to the task, frequent returns to something easier, always ending on a good note, et cetera).

The task is listed on the left. There is space for you to make comments about how easy or hard the task was for the dog, how many times it had to be repeated, or other questionable behaviors that appeared during the task. You should discuss these with your veterinarian at your re-exam appointment.

Dog’s Task

The dog sits, stays, and relaxes when:

- The object is placed on the floor 3 meters (10 feet) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 2.5 meters (8 feet) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 2 meters (6.5 feet) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 1.5 meters (5 feet) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 1 meter (3 feet) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 0.5 meter (20 inches) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 0.25 meter (10 inches) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 10 centimeters (4 inches) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 5 centimeters (2 inches) away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor 2 centimeters away from the dog; briefly retrieve and replace the object.
- The object is placed on the floor, touching the dog’s feet; briefly retrieve and replace the object.

For Future Repetitions

- Repeat all tasks in different locations.
- Repeat all tasks with all family members.
- Repeat all tasks with only every second or third being rewarded with a treat. (Remember praise!)
- Repeat with only intermittent treat reinforcement. (Remember praise!)
See the “Advanced section” that follows.

Advanced Section—and for All Puppies!

Have your dog sit and relax while you hold out a toy in which your dog is interested.

Put the toy directly under your dog’s nose or gently in his mouth and say “Take it.” Before the object can be fully grasped and the dog leaves, say “Good boy!” and then say “Drop it.” Hold out a tiny treat as a reward. As soon as the dog drops the toy, reward him for giving it up, even if he never really grabbed it completely. Letting a toy go is easier for puppies if they have not fully grabbed it and started to shake it. Otherwise, the movement and “playback” character of the toy is so rewarding that they will not initially want to give it up.

Dog's Task

- For the first pass of this program use a toy that is not a favorite for your dog.
- For very reactive dogs you can start with a toy that the dog actually does not like, because if he doesn't "take it" you can still reward him for "drop it" as you move the toy away.
- Put the toy into your dog's mouth or, if he will take the toy, offer it with the request to "Take it" and let the dog hold it 1 second; then repeat the request to "Drop it," as above.
- Put the toy into your dog's mouth or, if he will take the toy, offer it with the request to "Take it" and let the dog hold it 2 seconds; then repeat the request to "Drop it," as above.
- Put the toy into your dog's mouth or, if he will take the toy, offer it with the request to "Take it" and let the dog hold it 3 seconds; then repeat the request to "Drop it," as above.
- Put the toy into your dog's mouth or, if he will take the toy, offer it with the request to "Take it" and let the dog

hold it 4 seconds; then repeat the request to "Drop it," as above.

- Put the toy into your dog's mouth or, if he will take the toy, offer it with the request to "Take it" and let the dog hold it 5 seconds; then repeat the request to "Drop it," as above. Repeat the exercise above with toys that the dog finds progressively more fascinating.

Final Words

Our goal is to ensure that when you request that your dog take an object, he does so and drops it upon request. If you are working with a puppy with no behavioral problems, this goal may be accomplished. However, if you are working with a troubled dog who cares about objects, this protocol may help you to define your dog's limitations. Some dogs may learn to give up everything except one toy. The advantage of learning about such limits is that you can protect your dog from situations that he cannot manage. Not all of us are capable of behaving in a way others consider perfect all of the time. If you learn of a limitation for your dog, it may be kindest to respect it.