



The yellow fish story – Blue steals the remote control

Blue walks into the living room carrying the yellow fish in his mouth, while Simon sits on the sofa, watching his favourite TV program. Then suddenly, Blue sees a new interesting toy lying on the sofa – the TV remote control. Blue drops his fish, steals the remote control and the TV program changes. Simon gets angry, jumps from the sofa and approaches Blue to take back the stolen object. Simon pulls and pulls, but Blue will not give it back and growls. Now Simon feels annoyed and he runs away in tears.

Why is Blue growling?

Blue has found a new toy on the sofa. The toy smells interesting. It is covered with human odours, and so Blue grasps it. Blue has no idea what the toy means in human terms and so he is quite surprised when he sees Simon's reaction. Blue does not want to give up his new toy, so when Simon starts pulling, he turns his head away and growls, as if to say: "Back off, Simon, this is mine now".

How to prevent this situation?

Children – Children should learn that dogs do not understand what objects can be chewed or not. It might be helpful to teach children with examples

from their own lives, (e.g. like the time they were curious to try daddy's shaving gel or mummy's lipstick and got it all over the place). In that way parents can explain that the dog too has to learn what is appropriate to play with and what is not. In all situations where the dog has stolen something, parents should encourage their children to come to them for help. Children should be rewarded for asking a parent for help.

Parents – Parents should make sure that they are aware of the dog's preferences of stealing particular objects. The best way for parents to prevent any competitive situation over a stolen object is to avoid punishment, but rather to teach the dog to trade household objects for a dog's toy, and to encourage (reward) the dog for playing with his own toys. It is a wise precaution to avoid these situations by ensuring that "hot objects" are not left lying around in the house.

Dog – Young dogs explore the world around them by taking objects in their mouth. Adult dogs may grasp objects simply because they are within reach. Reacting to the dog's action by trying to grasp it back is not advisable for many reasons. A dog can easily learn that people start reacting when he steals a "human" object, but that he receives no attention at all when he is chewing his ball quietly on his own. In that way, stealing objects can become a rewarding game to fill the dog's boring moments. Dogs can also learn that stealing human objects is generally followed by a competition. In this way, the dog can be encouraged to steal objects in order to play a rewarding tug of war game. There is a real chance that competition over objects will lead to risk situations, especially when children are involved.

What about your dog?

How does your dog behave around household objects? Does he trade them easily? Alternatively, does he chew them to destruction before you can intervene? If you notice that trading objects is a difficult or impossible mission, especially when there are signs of tension, stress, excitement or fear in your dog, it would be wise to contact your veterinarian or an animal behavioural counsellor for help.