



The flea story – Simon and his lilac rabbit

Simon is riding on his toy truck, carrying Fluffy the lilac rabbit under his arm. Blue is having fun chasing Simon, trying to catch Fluffy. At last, Blue manages to grab hold of Fluffy's ear and will not let go! Simon gets angry and smacks Blue on the head. Oh dear.. Blue immediately growls and snaps at Simon's hand. Simon now becomes frightened and moves quickly away.

Why is Blue biting Fluffy?

Blue sees Simon moving on his toy truck, carrying a toy. He is enjoying the chase - the harder he runs, the more he wants the rabbit! Once he has Fluffy in his mouth, Blue considers Fluffy to be his own and so he does not want to let go. When Simon hits him on the head, Blue feels threatened and upset. He "thinks" that someone is trying to take away his rabbit and so he snaps.

How to prevent this situation?

Children – Young children tend to think of their dog as a friend and act accordingly. Therefore, it is important for them to learn the difference between their human friends and their dog. A good start may be to show the children the dog's teeth, stressing how powerful they are and hence the need to respect them.

Even small breeds of dog may be relatively strong. An important lesson is what to do when the dog takes away a toy. Teach the child to drop things when the dog has taken them – even when it's a favourite toy. Reward your child when he comes for your help. This might encourage your child to act in the same way when you are out of sight.

Parents – Dogs learn by success, and so every action that appears successful is more likely to be repeated. The dog feels rewarded every time he successfully steals the child's toy. This particular aspect of learning illustrates the importance of consistency when teaching the child and the dog about toys and objects (what belongs to the child and what belongs to the dog)

Dog – Be consistent with your dog (and your child!) on a daily basis. For example, teach the dog that chasing or stealing the child's toys is never followed by a reward, nor indeed by a punishment. However, if the dog drops the child's toy or gives it back, this should be rewarded by attention or with a dog-toy in exchange. Attempt to involve the child whenever possible, teaching him to avoid conflict, and to realise that the parent will resolve the situation.

What about your dog?

A dog may regard chasing things as a challenge, even when these are perceived as forbidden objects. The act of stealing may be very tempting to the dog, and if you notice your dog appears highly rewarded by acting in this manner, try to solve it in a peaceful way. Ensure that 'human' or 'child' objects are not lying around, and whenever your dog has stolen something try to call him away from the object and encourage him to perform a new action. Avoid trying to pull or take away the object from the dog as this action might be copied by the child and lead to risk situations. If your dog fails to give back objects spontaneously, consider seeking advice from your veterinarian or an animal behaviour counsellor.