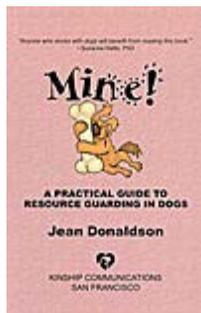


Mine! A Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs



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By Jean Donaldson

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Review by: Kate Connick, Sept. 2003

How can one deal with the dog that aggressively covets food, objects, its owner, resting areas, or even its own body? This is the topic addressed in Jean Donaldson's *Mine! A Practical Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs*.

Donaldson presents resource guarding as a normal, adaptive behavior and rejects notions that resource guarders are not "nice" dogs or are "dominant aggressive". Instead, she focuses on a behaviorist approach to conceptualizing and remediating such behavior.

In a nutshell, this primarily involves classically counter-conditioning a "conditioned emotional response" where an owner's approach is associated with high-value food treats, rather than representing a threat of loss or punishment. Initially this is done in the presence of little provocation, but incremental advances proceed until the dog can happily be approached when in the presence of whatever he formerly guarded most fiercely.

Anal retentive to a fault (and I mean that as a compliment in this context), Donaldson does an excellent job of breaking down forms of resource guarding behavior into detailed, progressive increments. In order to teach a dog to accept having its mouth opened, for example, she lists 60 separate steps - beginning with touching the dog's rump for a single second. It takes 27 steps before one even touches the dog's head.

Clearly, this is not a book for someone who wants a quick fix to their problem. It requires a food-motivated dog and an extremely dedicated and talented owner with the patience and perseverance to apply the technique.

Although the book is decorated with oddly cutesy clipart, it appears to be written more for the dog trainer than the owner himself. Donaldson repeatedly refers to the dog's owner as a third party, implying that the owner is not the target audience of the book. Similarly, her writing style maintains a quasi-academic aloofness. This is unfortunate, because a more approachable writing style and tone geared more towards the owner himself would make the book more welcoming for the reader who really would benefit from reading it.

Although clearly and intentionally very limited in scope, the book is extremely well done for what it is. Donaldson describes ritualized aggression in general, as well as various, specific forms of resource guarding. She notes that, "the most common constellation will involve guarding more than one kind of resource and being uncomfortable about certain kinds of body handling."

Many readers will be disappointed that she clings so strictly to a behaviorist paradigm. I, for one, do believe that behavior modification can work to varying degrees with resource guarding, especially less serious forms, but I also strongly believe that there are potent genetic tendencies towards this type of behavior that are foolish to ignore. Call it dominance aggression if you like, or call it plain foul temperament, but there are more than a few hardcore resource guarders who will play this kind of training game and learn to accept having the food bowl approached, only to opportunistically assault the owner that attempts to retrieve a fallen potato chip or pool of vomit that they hadn't expected the dog to guard. Many of these dogs really aren't so nice as pets. And many owners, after replacing a dog of this nature with a different pet (often after an ugly experience), marvel at just how different and pleasant life can be with a dog that does not have an inherent drive to aggressively defend coveted items.

In terms of risk and prognosis, Donaldson stresses the importance of bite inhibition and asserts that bite severity cannot be changed. The dog that bites hard *will* bite hard if and when it actually bites. She does discuss the use of muzzles, tethers, and Kevlar gloves in maintaining safety during behavior modification exercises, and she sensibly suggests management as an often-realistic alternative or adjunct to training. Her own line in the sand relates to bite severity as she asserts, "My personal recommendation is strong management or euthanasia for dogs who inflict deep punctures and contusions."

The bulk of the 91-page book focuses on the mechanics of breaking down the problem behavior into increments and building on success in fostering a happy mood in the dog when approached. Donaldson explains the impact of timing well. She also troubleshoots typical problems and particularly warns about a failure to generalize non-guarding to people who have not themselves participated in training exercises. She also hammers home the point that the dog will tend to revert to guarding outside of a training context unless one specifically trains for "cold trial" approaches.

All in all, Donaldson covers the subject with great care, and I would recommend this book to the owner of a resource guarder. It's very useful to have a small, highly targeted book that discusses a specific behavioral issue, and I'm not aware of any other book that addresses this subject matter in the same kind of detail.