



Resource Guarding

What Is Resource Guarding?

Resource guarding refers to a dog displaying behavior (growling, snapping, etc.) intended to convince other dogs or humans to stay away from a particular treasure or "resource." The resource can be food, treats, toys, a place (a bed or favorite chair), or occasionally a person. Basically, a resource is anything that is considered by the dog to be of high value.

Resource guarding is normal dog behavior. Dogs have evolved as opportunistic feeders, and it's natural for them to protect what they consider to be "theirs" from potential takers. The displays of growling and related body language are the dog's way of saying, "Back off! This is mine, and I don't intend to give it up." In most cases, the dogs are simply communicating, and one dog will back down. If, however, the dogs fight over resources or if a more timid dog feels stressed, you should separate the dogs around desired objects, like food, bones, and toys. The easiest thing to do is to put them in different rooms, so they can each enjoy their prize. Also, remove potentially guardable items when the dogs are together.

That said, resource guarding can be a serious problem if a dog threatens to bite his human family when they try to take something away. Dogs must be willing to give up things they would rather keep, like that plastic bag or turkey bone. Resource guarding is a major cause of aggression toward humans, particularly toward children. Children, especially small children, carry around toys and food where the dog can reach them. Children are less likely to understand the importance of respecting the dog's possessions and are likely to grab for them. Finally, their height means that bites to children often occur on the face or upper body, resulting in more serious injuries.

What Does Resource Guarding Look Like?

Resource guarding can occur over a variety of objects. Some dogs only guard what they are actually holding (a toy or bone, for example) or when they're eating. Other dogs guard toys or treats in their general vicinity, even when they don't seem all that interested in them. A few dogs guard space, like the couch or bed. Dogs may guard resources from other dogs, humans, or both. Resource guarding can also vary in severity, from the dog that will simply move the object away to the dog that snarls, growls, snaps, or bites if approached. The guarding behavior can sometimes escalate through these levels as a particular dog perceives an increasing threat. Lower level behaviors (e.g., snarling or growling) are warnings. **Don't punish your dog for these warnings**, or he may stop giving warnings altogether and move directly to a more aggressive behavior, like biting.

What Can I Do?

Whether you have a puppy, a new dog that doesn't yet have a resource guard, or an occasional, but not dangerous, resource guard, you want your dog to learn not to guard his food and to willingly give up an item. Practice these exercises frequently *before* you really need them.

- Approach your dog's food bowl while he is eating and, without bending down, drop a delicious treat (something like a piece of chicken or beef) into his bowl. This will teach him that humans approaching his food are not a threat, but rather something good. You can also hand-feed your dog to set up a strong association with people as providers of good things. This is especially helpful when you first bring a dog into your home. If your dog is showing signs of guarding before you approach his dog bowl or other resource, then do not approach, but instead drop a few treats on the floor. Progress at your dog's comfort.
- Choose a word or phrase like "drop it" or "give" to use as a release cue when you want your dog to give you whatever he has. Get an empty paper towel roll, a toy, or other item that will interest your dog, without being high value. You will also need some really yummy treats (diced cheese, hot dogs, whatever your dog loves). While holding onto one end, offer your dog the cardboard roll or other item, moving it around to make it more exciting until he takes it. Continue to hold onto it, so he can't grab it and run. Now, stick a treat right under your dog's nose. Your dog will likely spit out the item. When he does that, give him the treat.
- After this is working consistently, add your verbal cue, "drop it" or "give" (in a happy voice), as he sniffs the treat. After your dog has finished the treat, entice him with the original item again. Once you are confident that the item interests him, add the cue "take it". Then, use your cue of "drop it" and repeat the trade. Your dog is learning that when he lets go, he not only gets a treat, he gets back the item he originally gave up. Note: When not practicing, move the item out of sight, so that your dog doesn't keep picking it up, in order to get a treat.

When working on these exchanges, make sure you maintain a non-threatening position like sitting or kneeling and angled a little to the side. Leaning over or walking directly toward a dog is often a trigger for resource guarding. If your dog becomes still and stiff or raises a lip at any time, don't continue.

Remember, the key is to trade for an item of greater value. And the dog gets to decide what's valuable. Generally, though, that item will be an especially tasty (and if necessary, smelly) treat. Using food also has the advantage of allowing you to practice this exercise a number of times in quick succession.

If there is a specific item that your dog guards (a chew toy or favorite tennis ball), that item is "off limits" until your dog learns to willingly share his treasures. Put the item out of sight. When your dog learns to "drop" items of lesser value, then...and only then...will he be allowed to first practice with his "special" item, and then have access to it on a regular basis. The same principle applies to places. If your dog guards the couch, use a baby gate or tether, so that your dog doesn't have access to the couch. If it's your bed, your dog should not be allowed in the bedroom.

If your dog seems to guard you when another person approaches, he is probably guarding himself, not you. Your dog doesn't feel safe, but is comfortable enough in your presence to stand up to the perceived threat. Small dogs, in particular, tend to act out when their person is holding them. Don't carry your small dog around everywhere; let him explore and gain some confidence. If your dog is reactive around people, stay at a distance where your dog isn't

reacting and give your dog one tasty treat after another (the size of a pea) until the person is gone. This will help your dog develop a positive association with people.

What If My Dog is Already a Serious Resource Guarder?

If your dog aggressively guards resources, especially if he has made you feel unsafe or if you have children in the home, you should consult a positive reinforcement trainer or behaviorist from our referral list to help with that behavior. While resource guarding is not uncommon, it can become a serious issue that is potentially dangerous for both dogs and people. Many bites, especially to small children, occur as a result of resource guarding. Keep your dog and your family safe by looking for professional help to deal with this issue.

Key Points to Remember

- Resource guarding is a natural behavior for dogs, but it must be managed so that it doesn't become an aggressive behavior.
- Prevent inappropriate behaviors from developing by rewarding desirable ones. Take the opportunity to create positive associations between people and resources.
- Good management will keep your dog from getting things he shouldn't. Close doors, put the trash in the closet, and keep the laundry basket out of reach.
- Resist chasing your dog. The chase is a reward and teaches your dog that theft brings attention...and play. Get in the habit of trading for something better.
- When teaching your dog to "drop it" or "give", start with boring items and gradually work up to more valuable ones.
- Make sure that your "trade" is more valuable than what you are asking your dog to give up. Your dog gets to define "valuable."
- Never hit, scare, or threaten your dog in order to get something from him, even if he snarls or growls. He is telling you to "back off," and that's a warning message you want him to be able to express. Dogs that are punished for growling go straight to biting.
- If you have a multi-dog household and one or more dogs are resource guarders, feed them or give them bones or toys in separate rooms.

Here's some tips to stop the problem...

1. Preparation!

You can help your dog by preparing some extra tasty treats – something they really like so they'll very much welcome you bringing them to them.

2. Calmly and quietly drop some treats near your dog while they are eating from their bowl.

You don't need to say anything at all or go right up to them – because this might make them worry. Just approach gently and scatter a few treats onto the ground near your dog.

3. Once you've dropped the treats, walk right away again!

Your dog needs to understand they will be able to enjoy finishing their meal and having these additional bonus treats without any pressure at all.

4. Repeat this whenever your dog is being fed from their bowl

Through doing this over and over, your dog will be learning to look forward to you approaching them while they're eating and that there is no risk that you're coming to take anything away from them – because you're actually coming to make things even better for them!

5. Progress to dropping food into an empty bowl

For their next mealtime, as long as your dog appears comfortable and doesn't show signs of being worried when you have approaching, place their bowl down completely empty. Take a handful of their normal food, walk over to the bowl and drop it in for your dog to eat. Walk right away again so there's absolutely no reason for them to become worried and as soon as they've finished return and drop in another handful of food! They'll anticipate you approaching their bowl with good things happening as a result!

6. Help your dog learn to SWAP their toys for other toys, treats and fun!

When your dog is playing with a toy, get something they like even more than that – perhaps a different or favourite toy, or some extra tasty treats – and offer this to your dog a little distance away from what they already have. They should be enticed to drop what they have and come to you to get their reward! They'll be learning that it is a good idea to let go of things they are enjoying, because it means they'll be replaced with something even better!

If you cannot get within a few metres comfortably whilst your dog is eating, then sit side on looking away from your dog at the comfort zone during each meal time. After a few meals try and sit a foot closer, continue this process until you can be close enough to introduce the treats. Always sit at a distance that the dog is comfortable with, you do not want your dog to be uncomfortable with your proximity, this is a trust building exercise.