

It's A Dog's World™

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RESOURCE GUARDING

“You shouldn’t bother the dog’s food while he’s eating,” is a traditional piece of dog advice that is based on the assumption that dogs protect or guard those things (“resources”) that they value and don’t want to lose. And food certainly fits that description. But is that advice valid?

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?

First of all, remove anything he may protect. If you can't remove the item (such as a bed or couch), block access to it by closing a door or putting up a gate. Keep him on lead in the house so you can more easily control him. Teach him to "Leave It" in a positive, fun way. Do NOT make this into a battle. Make him think this command is an opportunity for a reward, not a chance to lock horns with you. Always start teaching this command with boring objects so that praise and treats will be the obvious choice. Reward spitting things out. Much of this sort of aggression is man made. People get angry when their dog takes things, then fail to give him a way to please them. They create a situation where, once something is in their dog's mouth, there is no way for the dog to win. This can force the dog to start defending himself.

* Here's the rule: Once something is in your dog's mouth, it is TOO LATE to teach him not to take it. The only thing you can teach him now is to spit it out promptly. Therefore, reward spitting it out.

* Take then Give. Early on, practice "Out" with your pup. Walk up when he is chewing a toy. Say "Out" and take the toy. Praise him for his brilliance. Give him a treat. Return the toy and leave him alone. A few weeks of this once or twice a day and your dog will want you to come and take him toys.

* Ignore him. Do not look at or speak to him unless he is working for you and even then, keep attention short, sweet and intense after which you ignore him again. You want him to want your attention, not constantly be getting more of it than he desires. Leave him wanting more.

* Redirect him. If he is pawing you then keep him on lead and work his demanding self. Every time he paws you have him "Sit, down, Sit, down -- come, stay, OK" -- with little praise. He may well decide that a nap is a better idea.

* Teach him to move out of the way. This will help with his understanding that you lead and he follows. If it is safe to do, simply shuffle your feet into him (no kicking) until he moves then praise him. Or leave a lead on him and guide out of the way then praise.

* He owns nothing! He has no "favorite" chair or toys that are "his" -- everything in the house is yours. If he is protective over anything, a bowl or a toy, remove it until his attitude has improved.

* All of his time must be spent on the floor. The higher up he is in the room, the higher up he is in his head. Nope, his place is on the floor. Teach him to get off things on command. Always praise him cheerfully for obeying. If need be, close off rooms and/or leave a lead on him so you can manage him more easily. Always praise him cheerfully for obeying --- that is important!

* Confine him daily. Daily crating can help keep this sort of dog out of trouble. Even if you are home with him, crate him for several hours every day. [*Note: Do not crate a dog more than 5 hours a day; any longer can be detrimental to behavior and mental development.*]

* Increase his exercise. This is a great deal of change for him. Exercise will help relieve stress and release excess energy. Be sure to play games that promote cooperation and control -- skip tug-of-war, wrestling and chasing after him.

* Neuter him! The most serious bites come from intact male dogs. Make the neuter appointment today!

We do NOT recommend:

Going to battle over a squeaky toy. Your dog, no matter how small, can injure you. When a dog shows he is ready to battle a human, we already know that he is misinformed and confused. We need to straighten out that confusion prior to discussing that unwanted aggression. If you attack him for threatening to attack you, you may well escalate his aggression. And, even if you "win" he may decide to fight sooner and harder next time.

What he needs is education, not attack.

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."

Key Points to Remember, Continued

- 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.