

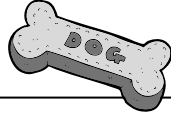


RESOURCE GUARDING

Resource guarding is when a dog reacts when they perceive a threat to a valuable resource in their possession. The dog feels they are about to lose something and takes action to keep it. Resource guarding does not always have to end with growling, lunging, biting, or fighting.

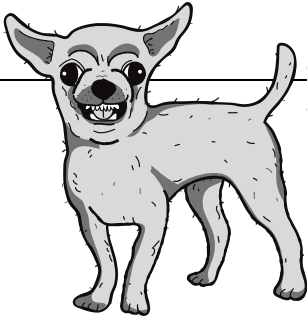
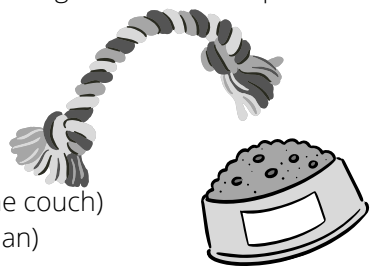
Guarding resources is a natural dog behavior. It's a natural animal behavior — humans included! Access to resources like food, water, and a safe space is essential to survival. It's hardwired into animal nature to protect the things we believe we need to survive. While it is normal dog behavior, it's not a desirable one. Resource guarding becomes a dangerous problem if a dog is willing to bite or fight to keep an item. This is especially worrisome in a home with young children, elderly family members, or if the dog is not predictable in what items they decide to guard.

COMMON ITEMS THAT TRIGGER RESOURCE GUARDING



While most often seen around food items, a dog can develop resource guarding with any item that they deem "valuable." This might be something we don't consider very important, like a sock, but that sock could be your dog's most beloved possession.

- 🐾 Food and Treats
- 🐾 Food Bowl (Full or Empty)
- 🐾 Bones and Edible Dog Chews
- 🐾 Toys
- 🐾 Spaces (Beds, Crates, Spot on the couch)
- 🐾 People (Laps or The Whole Human)



SIGNS OF RESOURCE GUARDING

These are the most obvious signs of resource guarding.

- 🐾 Growling
- 🐾 Lunging and Air Snapping
- 🐾 Biting

In developing and "milder" cases of resource guarding, a dog might show less intense (and therefore less obvious) signs of guarding behavior. These are the more subtle signs that build up to the actions described above:

- 🐾 Freezing
- 🐾 Eating Faster
- 🐾 Taking an item and moving away
- 🐾 Braced body position over the item
- 🐾 Side eye staring or tracking the other dog approaching
- 🐾 Raising lips and baring teeth
- 🐾 Ears pinned flat against the head
- 🐾 Hard Stare

Sharing our lives with our dogs means that we need to make sure they understand that there are plenty of resources. There's no need to guard food, toys, or space if we teach them that our removing an item, such as their chew, results in something equal or better than what they had. Giving up something to us willingly and happily needs to be trained and rewarded for our dogs so that resource guarding doesn't become an issue.

Unfortunately, the collective human response to a dog who is resource guarding has been the wrong one for too long. Using punishment and aversive as a response to resource guarding can result in more resource guarding.



WHAT NOT TO DO

Don't punish the growl

Never punish a growling dog. You can punish away a growl, sure, but all you've done is make a dog bite more likely. If your dog learns that growling to express their discomfort at your approach results in an aversive (such as yelling, hitting, a "tap" from a shock collar), and the loss of the item they were guarding, the next time you reach for it, they're more likely to skip the growl and go straight for a bite.

If someone keeps stealing my fries after asking them to stop, the next time they reach across the table, I might smack their fingers away (or worse ... don't steal my fries). Ignored warnings will escalate behavioral responses, in both humans and dogs. You don't want to take away important warning signs that your dog needs to communicate with you.

Don't "Play" With Their Food And Chews

So many clients come to me for help with resource guarding and tell me, "We wanted to prevent resource guarding, so we'd always stick our hands in our dog's food bowl while they were eating, or randomly take away their chew. That way, they know who's boss and that the food or chew belongs to us." Instead of the desired result, they now have a dog who snaps when they reach for the bowl or a dog that lashes out even at just their walking by the bowl. Sticking your hand in your dog's food bowl while they're eating, or just taking away their chew toy will backfire. All you're doing is annoying your dog and teaching them that when you reach for something, they'll lose it. Not the association we want our dogs to make!

Don't Leave Out Items That Your Dog May Guard

If your dog loves to grab socks from the laundry basket, and then growls or tries to bite when you try to take them away, set yourself up for success from the get-go (and avoid the possible surgery to remove the sock foreign body) by removing the opportunity. Don't leave items lying around that your dog might find valuable enough to guard. Keep your laundry basket up high. Pick up their food bowls between meals after they've finished eating and have walked away. Don't give them certain toys or high-value edible chews that they've become protective over.



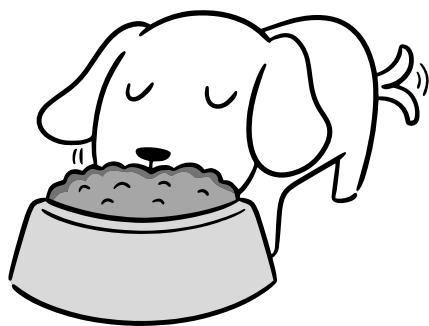
WHAT TO DO

Manage The Environment

Make a list of all of the things your dog has become possessive over. Then think about how you can change the environment to remove access to these things.

Let Your Dog Eat In Peace

For things that you can't just remove from your dog's environment, think about managing the context. If your dog guards their food bowl, set up a separate area where they can eat in peace. Use a gate to block off this area during mealtimes, so that no one can approach and make your dog feel the need to react. This is imperative if you have young children or elderly parents in the home who might not understand that they can't pet your dog during mealtimes. Blocking off separate feeding areas is also important if you have more than one dog, and one shows inappropriate resource guarding behavior.



If your dog guards things like a chew or long-lasting treat, give these to them in their safe space, crate, or other areas where they won't be bothered and let them enjoy it in peace. Ensure that everyone in your home knows that if the dog is eating or enjoying a chew, they are to let them be.

Start Desensitization and Counter Conditioning Training

This step is the bread and butter of changing resource guarding behavior. The goal is to change your dog's emotional response to your approach and removal of the item they usually guard. Instead of the dread and fear of losing it, we want them to think, *"Oh goodie! She's coming over here, and that means something awesome is about to happen!"*

BASICS OF COUNTER CONDITIONING FOR RESOURCE GUARDING

- 🐾 Find a high-value treat that your dog loves more than the thing they are guarding. Usually moist and smelly works best, such as small pieces of chicken, or turkey hotdog.
- 🐾 Know the distance at which your dog begins to resource guard. Some dogs don't get possessive of their item or food until you're a few feet away. Others get tense if you're even in the same room while they eat. The goal here is to find the distance at which they know you are there, but aren't becoming tense or reacting with guarding behavior. For example, if your dog begins eating faster when you're three feet away, start this exercise from six feet away. You're determining what their distance threshold is for guarding a resource.
- 🐾 Give your dog their meal or chew as usual, then walk away.
- 🐾 Approach your dog, but stop a few feet before their distance threshold. Toss a piece of chicken to them. Once they eat it, toss another. Do this a few times before leaving the area.
- 🐾 Continue this exercise any time your dog has something they guard.
- 🐾 After a few sessions, begin to add one more step towards them before tossing the treat, and then step back. This is where you're decreasing their distance threshold. Don't rush this step.
- 🐾 If your dog gets tense or shows other signs of resource guarding, take the training back a step.

Think about working in small "slices" when treating your dog's resource guarding. Don't rush through the process and just reach for their bowl — that's setting them up to fail, and you might get bit. With practice and consistency, your dog will learn to anticipate good things when you approach them. In many cases, these dogs choose to leave their food bowl or chew to happily approach you.

