

MINE! THE RESOURCE GUARDING DOG



Does your dog growl at you when you approach his food bowl? Does he grumble when you try to take away a toy? Does he snap at you when you even step near him when he's got a bone? Does he bare his teeth when you approach the couch? If not, you're lucky! Read through this information and start working with your dog now, to keep him in the blissful state of loving your approach to his food bowl. If not, read on to find ways to help your dog. The technical term for this behavior is Resource Guarding, and it's an absolutely *normal* dog behavior. However, it's not something we humans appreciate. Fortunately, resource guarding is also a behavior that we can change.

A dog is an animal, a specialized wolf living in the human den, and not a furry little person - matter how we view him. Simply because he lives in our home and because we view him as part of our family makes most owners think we should be able to take a bone or any other item from our dog at will. We become easily affronted if our dog decides to become possessively aggressive about his toys - even more so than if our kids become angry if we try to take their toys away! But when our dogs become aggressive about keeping hold of their bones or toys or bed, the first thing we must do is not to see the issue as one of our dog engaging in 'point scoring' with ulterior motives of longer term control of his human pack, but rather as one of safety for ourselves. If we become drawn into physical combat with our dogs over possessions, as we will see later, we are more likely to cause ourselves a great deal of problems with our dogs in our day-to-day lives together than we are to teach them not to guard their toys or bones.

Dogs, being predators, come programmed to guard resources that are crucial to their survival as part of their behavioral inheritance from their ancestor, the wolf. Some of those resources may be in short supply at certain times of year or in certain environments, and are therefore valuable. It is beneficial for wolves and dogs to have the propensity to look after their food and bits and pieces against other animals including, sometimes, members of your own group. For example, this is usually not true for grazing animals in terms of food - after all, what's the point of arousing yourself to look after your supply of grass when grass is everywhere?

It's very much a mistake simply to label a dog with a resource guarding problem as 'dominant', which is a very outdated term in canine behavior therapy. This is largely because it is just too simplistic to think that everything a dog might do which his owners disapprove of is some kind of a bid for power, especially if it involves threat behavior. This label can also encourage owners to look for opportunities to score points back on their dog when their time would be much better spent looking for opportunities to teach him not to guard his possessions and to reward him for doing other things.

Here are a few of the myths about resource guarding, according to Jean Donaldson's new book "Mine! A guide to resource guarding in dogs."

Myth #1: Resource guarding is abnormal behavior.

Myth #2: Because resource guarding is driven largely by genetics, it can't be changed.

Myth #3: Resource guarding can be cured by making a dog realize that resources are abundant.

Myth #4: Resource guarding is a symptom of "dominance" or "pushiness."

Myth #5: Resource guarding is the result of "spoiling" a dog.

So if the answer is not to "dominate" your dog or shower it with freely available food, then what is it? Simple. **Make your dog understand that the approach of a human to his food, toys, space, etc. is a good thing.** The process is called classical conditioning. Just as the clicker is associated with treats in your dog's mind, the approach of a human hand, face, or other body part to his food dish should mean better food is on it's way.

The following process should be done with ALL dogs, for their entire lives. The only part that changes is how often you do these exercises, what sorts of things your dog has when you approach, and how close you can get to the dog before presenting it with the treat. Every capable member of the family should take part in these exercises, keeping safety firmly in mind.

Ask your pet to Say Please. There are two reasons to do this. One is to inform your dog that you and your family are the source of all good things, and only by being polite does he get them from you. The second reason is for all family members to practice training with your dog, so that he listens to everyone in the family. This may or may not help with resource guarding, but it's not a bad perk! If certain members of your family are being guarded against, then those people are the ones who should be asking the dog to Say Please more often.

Teach your dog the cue GIVE. Start with objects that he does not value as much and treats that are highly valued. Then gradually work your way up to objects that he cares very much about. Ask for him to give the object, then either wait for him to do so (if he knows the cue) or cause him to do so by presenting food near his mouth. Reward and praise him for dropping the object, then give it back to him as soon as he's done chewing. Practicing this cue, giving the resource back each time, helps the dog understand that giving away his resources to a human is a good thing, so there's no reason to guard them. Children should only work on this step under adult supervision.

Teach your dog the cue OFF. If he is guarding the furniture, teach him to jump off of it on cue. Get him up on the couch by patting on it or luring him with a treat. Don't give the treat yet (we want to reward for "off", not jumping on the couch). Then say "off" and lure him back onto the floor. If you use a clicker, click as soon as he heads off the couch. Give him the treat. Don't start to teach off when he's all settled down on the couch. Work up to that level.

Condition your dog to expect good things when you approach him, especially if he has some sort of highly prized resource, like a bone. As with "give", start with something he does not guard. Walk over, present the treat while he's enjoying his low value toy or food, and leave. Do this with several low value toys throughout the day. Repeat this for several days until he begins to look up at you, with a "Hey, she's here to give me a treat" expression on his face. With the low value objects, move up to touching the dog in some way, grabbing the object (often saying "give" first), then popping a high value treat in his mouth and returning the object. Over a period of weeks or more, gradually move up to repeating the above with higher and higher value toys or food. With high value toys/food/bones, start by just walking by, out of the range that makes him growl, and dropping a treat. Move closer as the days go by, if the dog is ready; never progress faster than your dog is happily willing to go. If the dog is not relaxed and happy at any stage, you have moved too fast. Retreat to the previous level. Repeat this entire process with several high value objects. After that, progress to doing this process with more people around, more stress in the environment. Children should only work on the conditioning step under adult supervision.

Keep your dog from exhibiting resource guarding behavior by not moving past his acceptance level. If he growls when you get within three feet of his toy, then don't make him growl -- stay more than three feet away from his toy. Better yet, remove the toys that he guards from the living area, so that he can't accidentally be triggered. If he guards his dinner, make sure no one approaches or give him his dinner in a separate room, for now. If he guards the couch, try to keep him off of it by not inviting him up and/or by making it uncomfortable to lay on (an upside-down carpet protector works well for that). Any approaches that you make to your dog at this time while he has a resource should be on purpose and accompanied by a treat. Do NOT punish him for growling by scruff shaking or any other show of violence. All you will be doing is proving to your dog that he was right -- humans are crazy and you've got to protect yourself from them!

Maintenance. After your dog is happily accepting any human approach to his food or toys (a state that humans call 'normal' and dogs call 'strange'), you are at the maintenance stage. Twice a week, at first, then once or twice per month, approach him while he's eating, pick up the bowl, and plop in a handful of treats before setting it back down. Do the same with toys or bones as well. Occasionally practice the "give" cue, replacing the surrendered object with something else if you really must take it away. Finally, continue the Say Please Protocol for the rest of the dog's life, incorporating new tricks as your dog learns them.

Oh no, he's doing it again! If your dog ever starts up again with resource guarding, it's not because he is trying to take over the world. It's probably because you weren't keeping up on his training and he has started to notice that it's not such a good thing, after all, to give up his resources. Remind him that humans are the source of all good things by going through the above process again.