

Understanding Resource Guarding & Knowing When To Seek Help!



Pet Professional Guild Educational Handout #5

Resource guarding is a relatively common behavior in dogs and can become a behavior problem when directed at people. It occurs when a dog becomes 'protective' about an item (i.e. resource) that he has in his possession and sees as important. The reaction you see from your dog as you approach is the guarding behavior. The dog is guarding the item because he is worried you will take it from him. The item does not have to be food. It can be anything a dog considers valuable.

The Most Common Items Guarded Include:

- Food
- Toys and balls
- Items of clothing or footwear
- Miscellaneous items (e.g. tissues, food wrappers, paper bags)
- Locations (e.g. furniture, beds, entrances to areas, food preparation areas, crates, cars)
- People (i.e. individuals within the family)

What Does Resource Guarding Look Like?

When a dog has a valued resource, he will show distinctive behaviors which can include any or all of the following:

1. Eating the item more quickly as you approach
2. Hovering over the item
3. Moving or running away from you and attempting to hide or finish the item
4. Becoming very still and tense (termed "freezing")
5. Tucking his tail between his hind legs (a fear response)
6. Flattening his ears against his head with a stiff body
7. Moving between you and the resource
8. Staring at you
9. Growling
10. Showing his teeth
11. Lunging suddenly with a warning air bite (no skin contact made)
12. Lunging and biting



The important thing to remember is that dogs who guard resources are not "bad" or "dominant" dogs (a scientifically incorrect and outdated term). Instead they are usually feeling insecure and assume your approach is a major threat. If your dog shows any of the above guarding behaviors, you need to respect him and move slowly away so he does not feel the need to escalate into a more ferocious display to tell you to "back off."

Dog behavior can be subtle to our human eyes and we often fail to pick up on the important messages our dogs are so desperately trying to tell us. When we do this, a resource guarding dog can quickly escalate into a biting dog. The problem becomes even more important to solve when children are in the house or visitors come over who are not aware of the problem. You may be placing everyone in a dangerous situation.

Preventing Resource Guarding

The good news is that resource guarding can be easy to prevent in puppies. We simply need to make them feel relaxed and secure when they have something they value. Equally, we need to let them know that if we do need to take something from them, it will always be replaced by something even better. By doing this, puppies can learn that humans approaching is never a threat but always a wonderful thing. We do this with food bowl exercises and/or by teaching them to exchange or “give.”



When to Seek Help

Treating or rehabilitating a puppy or dog who already exhibits any of the signs listed above requires a more thorough and planned approach from a qualified dog trainer or veterinary behaviorist. If children are in the home or are regular visitors, it is even more urgent to seek help.

Finally and most importantly, if your dog or puppy resource guards it is vital that you do not use any form of punishment to “fix” him. Resource guarding is usually due to the dog feeling insecure. Punishing an insecure dog may cause him to escalate his guarding behavior, either with you or an unsuspecting family member. Punishment can actually prevent a dog from giving early warning signs. Next time someone approaches there may be no warning and the dog will launch straight into a bite. Additionally, you may reinforce the dog’s fear and insecurity and destroy your relationship with him. Prevention is best. If a problem already exists, working with an experienced trainer to restore confidence using food bowl exercises and teaching exchange/give will provide the best outcome for everyone.

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Pet dog owners should begin training and socializing their dog as soon as he/she joins the family. All training should be done in a positive manner using rewards based, scientifically sound training methods.

Please consult the Pet Professional Guild’s Directory to find a trainer in your area:

Pet Professional Guild Directory: www.petprofessionalguild.com/PetGuildMembers.

To learn more about force-free training and humane, up-to-date, scientifically sound behaviour modification and training methods, see www.petprofessionalguild.com