



Living with a Dog that Resource Guards

It is a part of a dog's survival instinct to guard or possess food and other valuables; behavior can range from putting a head over a valued possession, running away with the item, growling at a person's approach, to full blown aggression such as snapping, lunging, or biting. However, in most cases, resource guarding can be managed in a household and there are ways to help the dog make changes.

Simple management in the home may be all that is needed for a successful living situation in many mild cases. It is important to identify what a dog may guard in order to set up a management plan. A dog can guard anything considered valuable, but most often it is food, chew bones or treats, a valued toy, beds or resting spots, and sometimes even family members.

Children in a home with a resource-guarding dog can be very risky. Unfortunately, young children are simply incapable of reading a dog's warning signs and may not understand that taking something away from a dog can result in a bite. Some dogs will guard an item dropped on the floor and even with watchful management in place, it's impossible to prevent accidents.



Household Management

Successful management involves identifying the triggers or items that the dog may guard and then setting up an environment to ensure everyone's safety. The following tips are recommended for different situations:

1. In the case of food bowl guarding, feed the dog in a quiet place, undisturbed. This may be a corner of the room, away from traffic. Notify household members that the dog is eating if it is not behind a door or barrier. Otherwise, the dog can be fed behind a gate, in another room, or in a crate as potential solutions.
***See our handout on Crate Training for more information.**
2. Remember that if a food item (or other valued possession) falls on the floor close to the dog, don't reach to pick it up. Never attempt to take a stolen item or piece of food from the dog. Teach the dog the cues "**Leave it and Drop it.**"
***See our handout on Leave it and Drop it to successfully teach the dog to trade up for higher value treats or items.**
3. Keep the dog off furniture, including the owner's bed. Enroll in a training class to teach the dog basic cue's including "off," using positive reinforcement such as clicker training.
***See our handout on Clicker Training for more information.**



Avoid reaching for the dog's collar to pull it off the furniture if the dog jumps up. Instead, toss its favorite treat with a happy voice and non-confrontational body language to call it off the furniture. Use a leash while relaxing in the living room to keep the dog from jumping up on the couch, or if necessary, use a crate at night to keep the dog off the bed. Once basic cues are mastered, focus on mat training to teach the dog it is rewarding to go to its own bed to relax or sleep. Leave the dog alone while in its resting place or sleeping.

4. Use special care and management if there are guests in the home, especially children. Even if a dog that has learned it is safe to have resources around trusted family members, the dog may not feel this way with unfamiliar people. Put the dog in a crate, behind a barrier, or in another room while food is present.
5. Watch for specific body language cues to help pre-empt a problem. When a dog feels happy it appears calm, breathes normally, is soft and wiggly, and may roll over on a hip or side. Body posture and eyes are soft and relaxed. Signs of guarding and aggression include: standing stiffly or hunkering over a food bowl or item, hard staring, tension in the face, growling, or snarling.
6. **Never punish guarding behavior.** Learn to recognize the early warning signs such as a growl or hard stare and back off. This will teach the dog that communication works without having to resort to a future bite and may lower conflict.
7. Work with puppies to desensitize guarding behavior by reviewing our handout on **Puppy Stages and What to Do**. When a puppy is conditioned at a young age it can learn that good things happen when a person approaches its food bowl or a treasured item.

Modifying Resource-Guarding Behavior

The following protocol is designed to help modify food bowl guarding behavior in mild to moderate cases and to teach a dog or puppy that good things happen when its food bowl is approached by a person. The protocol can also be helpful to work on modifying resource-guarding of chew objects.



Do not attempt to resolve the issue on your own if a bite occurred in the past or there is a chance the dog may bite again; instead consult a professional certified veterinarian behaviorist or certified professional dog trainer with experience in aggression.

If, at any time while working the following protocol, the dog growls or exhibits any of the guarding body language mentioned above, stop and back up. Going too fast will push the dog over threshold and demonstrates a need to slow down the process or seek help.

Step 1

Prepare a supply of the dog's favorite treats and put them in a pouch or bait bag. These can include cut up pieces of chicken, cheese, hot dogs, or the dog's special favorite treats. Tether the dog or puppy to a large, stable pole or object and give the dog its food in a bowl or favorite long-lasting chew such as a bully stick, pig ear, or stuffed Kong toy.

Step 2

As the dog begins to eat or chew, pass by or stand at a safe distance from the dog, about 6 to 8 feet from the end of the tether. Use special care not to move towards the dog but to pass by parallel to the dog or stand still. Toss several treats to the dog while standing or passing by. If any signs of guarding are observed, create more distance and try again.

Step 3

Repeat the last step for several days or weeks until the dog is looking up with happy body language anticipating the treats for about 10 sessions in a row. Then repeat the sequence taking one step towards the dog, tossing the treats, and taking one step back. Repeat this throughout the meal or while the dog is chewing.

Step 4

Every day, take another step closer to the dog to toss the treats while continuing to observe the dog's body language. Make sure the dog is happy and relaxed at each step and back up if freezing, hard staring, or growling is observed. The steps will probably go faster while conditioning a puppy that doesn't guard than with a known resource-guarding dog.

Step 5

When it is possible to stand next to the dog to toss the treats, and the dog's body language is still happy, start to drop the treats directly into the bowl, pause, and then walk away. Repeat this until the dog stops eating when approached and is waiting for the treats with anticipation and relaxed body language. At this point, encourage the dog to take the treat directly from the hand and then, retreat.

Step 6

Gradually increase the time by the food bowl alternately feeding the treats by hand and dropping them into the food bowl. If working with a chew, ask the dog to "Drop it" and jack pot with a few treats when it releases the chew when asked. Allow the dog to go back to the chew after finishing the treats.

Step 7



This next step should only be done with mild or moderate resource-guarding cases, where dogs have not inflicted a bite, unless supervised by a certified canine professional. Stand next to the dog while it is eating from his food bowl or chewing is treat. Bend down and touch the food bowl or chew with one hand while offering a treat with the other. Keep observing for any signs of tension. The dog should remain relaxed and happy.

Step 8

Repeat the previous step multiple times, observing the dog's body language. The next step is to **"trade-up"** the food bowl, drop a jack pot of treats, and walk away with the bowl. Put something extra tasty in the bowl and return it to the dog and walk away. If working with the chew, ask the dog to "Drop it" and work "trade-ups" continuing to jack pot when the dog releases the chew and then return it and walk away.

Step 9

Start back at the very beginning with other family members or people. It is important to generalize this behavior to avoid conflict. With young puppies or dogs, continue to periodically walk by the food bowl and drop a piece of chicken into the bowl. All objects taken away should be done by asking the dog to "Drop it" and followed by a "trade-up" using high-value treats.

When done slowly and with care, the dog will soon anticipate treats and good things happening when a person approaches, especially when they have something of value. By going through the above stages, resource-guarding can be de-railed in a young dog and modified to better and safer behavior in a dog already displaying guarding tendencies.