

Resource Guarding in Dogs

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What is resource guarding and why does it occur?

Resource guarding is a relatively common behavior problem in dogs. It is defined as a dog using avoidance, threatening, or aggressive behaviors to retain control of food or other items in front of a person or other animal.

Sometimes, the signs of resource guarding are subtle. In these cases, your dog may show avoidance behavior or mild signs of aggression and anxiety such as stiff or crouched body posture, pinned back ears, lip licking, and physically blocking access to the resource. The aggression may escalate to more severe and overt signs of aggression such as growling, snapping, or biting. Food and food-related items are the most common resources that are guarded by dogs. However, any resource that is valuable to the dog may be guarded. This includes but is not limited to toys, beds, furniture, bones, resting areas, and even certain people. Resource guarding may have a genetic component and occurs in males or females of any breed. This issue can develop at any age. Resource guarding may be an issue that appears and progresses over time, or it may begin suddenly after a change in environment or routine.

Resource guarding does not have anything to do with dominance. It is a common misconception that dogs show aggression or develop behavior problems because they do not understand their “place in the pack.” This misconception is problematic because it often leads to training using force

and punishment to show the dog who is “top dog.” However, dominance in this sense has been scientifically debunked. Using force and punishment in a situation like resource guarding often makes the behavior problem worse and can cause your animal to fear you and damage your relationship. To successfully manage resource guarding, we must change the underlying motivation and emotion behind the behavior (anxiety, fear, frustration). Studies have shown that reward-based methods are more effective and humane when managing behavior problems such as resource guarding.

To a degree, resource guarding can be considered a normal canine behavior since obtaining resources is necessary for survival. However, just because it can be considered normal does not make it desirable, safe, or acceptable in a household. Unfortunately, over time, dogs may learn that their aggressive responses are effective at protecting their resources, so the behavior will persist or even worsen. Additionally, if a dog’s mild signs of aggression are ignored or punished, this can cause their behaviors to escalate to more severe forms of aggression. For example, a dog may initially show mild signs such as freezing or hunching over their resource with a stiff body posture. If this behavior is punished or ignored the dog will likely realize subtle signs are not effective. In this situation, dogs are likely to escalate to more overt forms of aggression, such as growling, snapping, or biting. Then it becomes more challenging to manage and treat the issue.

How can my veterinarian help with Resource Guarding?

Your veterinarian may be able to help you with this problem themselves, or they may refer you to a veterinary behaviorist. If you are experiencing this problem with your pet, it is important that you discuss it with your veterinarian.

Resource guarding may be caused by an underlying medical issue, especially if the behavior starts suddenly in an adult dog. Your veterinarian will complete a thorough physical exam and may request further testing based on their findings to determine if there is a medical issue. Sometimes medications can be helpful in the treatment of resource guarding especially if anxiety is a cause for the behavior.



Photo courtesy of CattleDog Publishing

Treatment and Management: What to do:

- Safety is the utmost priority. You may need to use tools such as baby gates, crates, or exercise pens to separate the dog from people or other pets when the object is nearby.
 - Separate pets from each other when resources are nearby.
 - Attempt to avoid clutter in your home so that it is possible to have more control over things. You do not necessarily want to restrict access to the resources or take them away completely, but you do want to control the situation so your dog can get to their resources in a way that is safe for everyone.
- Identify all situations and resources that are guarded. Recording in a diary or on a calendar may be useful. You may want to record information such as:

- When/how often resource guarding is occurring
 - Who is the dog guarding the resource from?
 - What resources is the dog guarding?
 - What behaviors are you seeing from your dog during the incident?
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- Learn to understand and respect what your dog is telling you. Learn to recognize dog body language and understand how it can escalate from more mild, subtle signs of aggression (such as lip licking, stiff body posture, ears pinned back) to the overt signs of aggression (growling, snapping, biting). If we respect dogs' body language when they show mild signs of anxiety and aggression, we can likely avoid the behavior becoming more severe.

 - Make sure your dog gets enough exercise and play every day.

 - Behavior Modification
 - All household members must follow the same guidelines to manage this behavior. It must be a collaborative effort.

 - Here are some examples of behavioral modification techniques that may be used.
 - “Drop it”- Teach your dog to drop the item of value in exchange for a higher-value item or treat.

 - Relaxation exercises- this is especially helpful if resting places or certain people are guarded by the dog. With relaxation training, you can teach your dog to relax other places than the valued resting spot or away from the person that they guard. This can also include teaching a “place” behavior such as to a [mat](#) or dog

bed.

- Basket muzzle training - training your dog to be comfortable wearing a basket muzzle can be a useful tool to restrict access to certain resources for some situations.
- Be realistic about what you can expect from your dog and what you can handle in your specific situation.
- In rare and severe cases of resource guarding and aggression, euthanasia may be considered a humane option for both the dog's welfare and human safety.

Treatment and Management: What NOT to do:

- Do not use force or punishment to attempt to correct this behavior.
- Do not attempt to remove the resource of value from your dog as this could lead to injury.
- Your dog's resource guarding behavior may never diminish completely resulting in long-term management To reduce the behavior.

Prevention and Avoidance

- Expose puppies to a wide range of toys and encourage them to share by calmly exchanging toys during play.
- Train verbal cues such as "Drop it", "Trade", and "Leave it" using positive reinforcement training before resource guarding develops.

- Provide your dog with a safe, comfortable space such as a crate or exercise pen that is only for your dog. It is important to not play with your dog's food or put your hand in the bowl while eating. It is always important to add something like a special treat when humans are in close proximity to the bowl.

The treatment of resource guarding needs to be highly individualized for each dog and household. These dogs often need a combination of behavioral modification, training, and environmental and management changes.

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