

Resource Guarding – What It Is, How to Prevent It



A few simple tips can help you teach your puppy or dog that there's no need to get scary around her stuff.

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Many times a dog gets stiff and growly when people approach her food, toys, or whatever else she values. A few simple tips can help you teach your puppy or dog that there's no need to get scary around her stuff. Which is great, because serious resource guarding represents a high percentage of calls to anyone who works with behavior problems.

Dogs and Resource Guarding

We call it resource guarding when a dog stares briefly at another dog who approaches while she's on her favorite bed chewing her favorite chew. We call it resource guarding when a dog freezes, snarls, and launches himself at your torso if you approach while he's eating. And we call it resource guarding when Dogalini gives Scooter a dirty look if Scooter approaches while you're petting Dogalini, or if when you pet Scooter, Dogalini trots up and pushes him away.

Resource Guarding Can Be Mild or Serious

As you can see from those examples, resource guarding covers not only a variety of behaviors but also a wide spectrum of seriousness. It is normal dog social behavior to warn another dog off your goodies with a look or a lip curl; the socially appropriate response from the other dog is to abandon the attempt to get hold of those goodies. If the two dogs generally get along well and such encounters never, or only very rarely, escalate even as far as a quick scuffle, there's no call for humans to intervene.

Resource Guarding Against People

On the other hand, most behavior specialists would prefer to prevent or undo even the mildest resource guarding against people. In this article, I'll discuss the guarding of food, but the points I'll make apply to anything a dog might guard.

Sometimes people tell me Bowser gets a little stiff if you come within 6 feet of his dinner, so they just leave Bowser alone when he's eating. No problem. And there is an argument to be made that such mild guarding is normal behavior--after all, an animal won't last long in the wild if anybody can just march right up and take his food away.

The trouble with applying that argument to dogs who live in human homes is, what if the 3-year-old grandkid comes to visit and gets all in Bowser's face during kibble time? From Bowser's point of view, his polite warnings that this is *his* bowl, thank you very much, were ignored, so what could he do but escalate? From the toddler's point of view, all those stitches really, really hurt. And Bowser, of course, winds up dead.

How to Reduce or Eliminate Resource Guarding

Well-accepted, scientifically sound behavior modification can help the resource-guarding dog. Generally you should expect a variation on the theme of counterconditioning and desensitization. Starting with the mildest possible version of the problem situation, you teach the dog that the problem isn't actually a problem at all, but rather a predictor of yummy treats. Over time, you build up the dog's comfort level till she can handle situations that reflect normal life. A dog who growls over her food bowl when people are 6 feet away can learn to greet human approach with happy, relaxed wags instead. I've included further information in the Resources list, below.

An Ounce of Prevention

The catch is that, as always, it takes far longer to repair problem behavior than it does to install desirable behavior in the first place. And it's a truism that behaviors can't be guaranteed to leave the repertoire. Mainly we hope to see them move to a waaaay back burner.

Teach Your Puppy That You're Good News Around Food

Say you've just brought home a new puppy -- you're at the ideal time to keep resource guarding from ever manifesting itself. The suggestions I offer can lower the likelihood that your puppy will grow up to guard her food, but of course there are no guarantees in life.

The basic idea is that you install in Baby Dogalini's tiny little mind two great big ideas. One, food comes from you. Two, it is good news if you show up when she's already got some food. Install two big ideas in your puppy's mind: food comes from you, and it's good news if you show up around her food.

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Hand Feed Your Puppy

Teach the first lesson by hand feeding Baby Dogalini for a few weeks after you bring her home. This is one of the pleasantest puppy "chores" I can imagine. I often tell my clients to feed at least one meal a day by hand, but that's mainly to give them a concrete and practical guideline. As far as anyone knows, there's no magic number of hand-fed meals that will prevent resource guarding.

Use Your Puppy's Food as Training Rewards

You should also be using some of Baby Dogalini's food as training rewards--sure, she has a short attention span, but even at nine weeks a puppy can be learning to sit, lie down, walk next to you in the house, and come when called, not to mention any tricks you feel like teaching. Just before mealtime, set aside 10 or 15 bits of Baby Dogalini's food and use them as rewards in a short training session. Then either hand feed her, if you have time, or ask her to sit while you set down her bowl containing the rest of her food. The delivery of that bowl is a huge reward for her self-control in holding the sit. And all the time you're building up Baby Dogalini's sense that food is something you provide for her and that she can earn from you.

Add a Little Something Extra to Your Puppy's Bowl

The second lesson, that it's a Yay! moment when people show up near her food, is just as easy to teach. Keep a stash of goodies in the fridge--bits of leftover roast chicken or fish, pinky-nail-size cubes of cheese, a piece of penne bearing traces of Alfredo sauce. Once a day, as Baby Dogalini eats, swing by and feed her one of those goodies or drop it in her bowl. Every so often, pick up her bowl, feed her the goodie directly or add it to her food, and then return the bowl. Ask guests to participate, including children. Young children, of course, should have close adult supervision--this isn't a time to play with the puppy, but just to give her a little present. The message for Baby Dogalini: "My family, visitors, little kids--anybody coming near me while I eat is liable to make my supper even better! Yay, people!"

For Grown Dogs and Newly Adopted Dogs.

If you have an adult dog who's never tensed up around food, great. It still can't hurt to show up with a leftover piece of scampi from time to time when your dog's face first in her dinner bowl. Try these exercises, too, with a newly adopted dog, as part of getting your relationship on the right track from the very start. Word of caution--if you're walking up to your dog with that scampi and suddenly realize that, whoah, he does kind of look a little tense there, toss him the scampi, retreat, and then head for the Resources list at the end of this post. With these further resources, you may be able to repair a mild problem on your own. For serious resource guarding, especially if you have children, please get professional help. Meanwhile keep everyone safe--feed your dog in a quiet area of the house and leave him alone to eat. If he guards edible chews, either stop giving them or give them only under carefully controlled circumstances. I'll return to the topic of resource guarding in future.

Resources

Donaldson, Jean. "Assessment and Treatment of Resource Guarding." APDT Newsletter [now Chronicle of the Dog], November/December 2002. Available at <http://4pawsu.com/Donaldson.pdf>.

Donaldson, Jean. "Mine! A Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs" (Kinship Communications/San Francisco SPCA, 2002). This is a standard guide to counterconditioning and desensitizing procedures for resource-guarding dogs.

Miller, Pat. Positive Perspectives: Love Your Dog, Train Your Dog (Dogwise, 2004) includes an excellent short discussion of resource guarding and a protocol for modifying the behavior.

`googletag.cmd.push(function() { googletag.display('div-gpt-ad-341346550927432092-7'); });` Orr, Joan, and Teresa Lewin, "Resource Guarding." Especially helpful on the subject of children and resource guarding. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/yd5m586>