

Resource Guarding

Resource guarding refers to dogs that aggressively guard things they feel are precious to them. Dogs with this problem can become quite aggressive towards anyone who goes near their food bowl, bones, toys or any item they feel is worth guarding. For some dogs, resting places are worth guarding and still others guard their owners (a very precious resource), a behavior often perceived as "protective". Resource guarding stems from the fact that dogs are decedents of wolves, and as social predators, wolves are genetically programmed to guard their resources. We have tried to get resource guarding out of the dog through domestication but sometimes this ancestral behavior is triggered, and once triggered is often there for life.

Most of the time there is a genetic component to resource guarding. This means the dog is born with the propensity to guard coveted items. Because of this, we can sometimes see resource guarding in very young puppies. Resource guarding can get worse due to environmental influences however. Dogs with the propensity to guard learn that the behavior "works" for them to keep people away. Humans often make resource guarding worse by their response. For example: if a dog growls when a human goes near him when he has a bone and the human yells and takes the bone away anyway - the dog learns that growling doesn't work so the next time he may step it up a notch and escalate his behavior to snapping. This is why your response is very important. If a dog growls at you over an item, walk away and make a note of the incident. Additionally, aggression always feeds aggression so physical punishment is never advisable with a resource-guarding dog.

The degree to which behavior modification will work to improve the response of a resource guarding dog depends on many factors: how strong the response is; how long-standing the behavior is; how generalized the behavior is (does he guard one thing or many); and how severe the aggressive response is (does he growl or does he bite). Obviously, dogs who have been exhibiting the behavior for a long time, who will guard many different items, and whose response involves severe aggression like biting, will be very difficult to modify. In these severe cases, management is very very important. **It is never advisable to have a resource-guarding dog in a home with small children.**

We use behavior modification to teach a resource guarding dog to give up items on command and to accept people near their possessions, but the tendency to guard may stay with the dog for life. Even a dog that has gone through this program might guard something in the future because dogs do not generalize well. This means that if he gets ahold of something precious like a meat wrapper out of the trash or a chicken bone on a walk, he may revert back to his aggressive ways, growling, snapping at or biting you if you try to get the item away from him. It is also the case that the behavior modification you do may not generalize to people outside of your family or in locations other than your home. So even after working through this program you must ALWAYS supervise a resource guarding dog around visitors, strangers and in unfamiliar places.

The program to deal with a resource guarder involves training and the behavior modification techniques called systematic desensitization and counterconditioning. We want the dog to be under good verbal control and have a good history of responding positively to commands. We want the dog to learn that NOT guarding is more reinforcing than guarding. This program may take a long time and will require you to practice often.

Food Bowl Guarding - the goal is to teach your dog that food and humans go together.

Repeat each of the following steps until the dog is comfortable before you move to the next step (but do each step at least for a couple of days even if there is no issues). If, at a given step, the dog demonstrates any guarding (including growling, stiffness, freezing up), back off to an easier exercise and proceed more gradually to the problem exercise.

1. Hand feed your dog his entire meal for two weeks (handfuls, not individual pieces). Ask him to sit, lie down, watch me or any other behavior he knows and then offer the handful of food. This step teaches the dog that his food comes from YOU and that YOU control the resource. Use your clicker to mark the correct response before you hand him the food.
2. Feed in installments - Hold the dog's empty bowl, keeping one hand on it while you feed in handful installments by reaching to get the food out of another bowl on the table or counter with the other hand. Ask him to sit and wait for him to look at you - CLICK and give him a handful of food.
3. Put the empty bowl down on the floor next to you and then one handful at a time feed him his meal. Ask him to sit and wait for him to look at you before you CLICK and give the handful of food.
4. Put down an empty bowl and walk away. Then walk back to the empty bowl and dog, ask him to sit, pick up the bowl, put a handful of food in it, put it back down and retreat. Repeat until the whole meal has been fed.
5. Hold the full bowl, ask him to sit - CLICK and then offer the bowl (you are still holding it). Talk to him while he eats, and occasionally add a tasty treat to bowl with other hand.
6. Ask him to sit - CLICK and then give him his bowl of food on the floor. Reach for a special treat and drop it into his dish while he is eating. Repeat 2-3 times during the meal.
7. Work on approaching the dog while he is eating. Start by stopping far enough away that you do not trigger any response - CLICK and then toss a piece of chicken or other special treat at the dish, retreat and repeat, gradually closing the distance between yourself and the bowl before you CLICK and toss the treat (over the course of many sessions). This teaches the dog to anticipate something wonderful when he sees you coming towards his dish.
8. Start at #1 with another person (each person in the house should work on these exercises).

It is important that your children learn to respect the dog while he is eating or has a chewy. Older children should not do these exercises until all of the adults in the house have worked through to step 9. When you start to have the children work this program, you **MUST** supervise each step. Tether the dog while he eats using his leash so that he cannot lunge at, chase, or bite your child. Keep your children safe at all times, do not let them near the dog when he is eating while you work through the program. Small children should not participate - simply keep them away from the dog while eating.

Possession Guarding

Some dogs guard very specific items (bones, toys, tissues, etc.) while others guard items they have stolen (which can be anything). The more generalized the behavior, the harder it will be to modify. Practice these exercises every day.

Systematic Desensitization and Counterconditioning - changing the way your dog FEELS.

You need to teach your resource-guarding dog that your approach while he has an item is a good thing. To work on this, give your dog an item (bone, toy, etc) and let him settle in with it (tether him if you feel you need to be safe). Then approach to a distance that does NOT trigger the aggression and CLICK and toss a special treat if you see no aggression. Repeat this at this distance until you see your dog anticipate the treat when you come towards him. Then move a bit closer and repeat the exercises. Do this until you can walk right up to him CLICK and hand him a treat. **GO SLOWLY!**

Training - Drop It and Leave It

To teach your dog to accept giving up anything he has in his possession, you will have to teach him to "drop it" and "leave it". Practice first with boring objects and later with the objects that your dog guards. Do these exercises every day with as many objects as you can. We want the dog to realize that when he hears "drop it" or "leave it" he will be rewarded for complying no matter what he has in his mouth.

- Drop it: Use the "drop it" command to teach your dog to give up things that she has in her mouth. When she has an item approach her with a high value treat, show it to her, and when she spits out the item to get the treat say "drop it" in a cheerful voice and click and treat. Then pick up the item she dropped and give it back to her. Repeat this several times in a row and then leave her with the original item. This way she learns that dropping an item is rewarding and she will often get the item back in the end. Once you have associated the words "drop it" with the behavior of spitting something out of her mouth, you can start to use it as a command for the behavior.
- Leave it: Use the "leave it" command when you want your dog to move away from something. To train the command - have a helper tempt your dog with a low value item (dry food, boring toy) - when she shows interest in the item move towards her, put a yummy treat right to her nose and lure her away, cheerfully telling her to "leave it" as she is moving towards you. Click and treat when you have moved her several feet away. Do this several times so that you associate the command "leave it" with the act of moving away from something. Once you think she has the association, you can start using "leave it" as the command. When she is interested in something, say "leave it" without showing her the treat. If she has learned that those words mean move away from one thing and get something better - she will do it. The next step will be to increase the value of the items she must move away from.

Set up practice sessions so the dog learns what is expected of him. **Any object that your dog currently guards should be forbidden until you have worked your way up to them in the practice sessions.**

Trade Game

Before you have the "drop it" command reliable - if your dog gets a hold of something that he is not supposed to have or something you know he will guard - either ignore him (if not valuable to you or dangerous to the dog) or play the trade game. Get a handful of VERY tasty treats (chicken, cheese, etc) and toss them on the floor several feet away from the dog. Once he runs to get the pile of treats on

the floor - pick up the item. The key is to get the item without eliciting aggression. You may have to keep tossing treats farther away from the item before it is safe for you to pick it up.

Location guarding

The classic location guarder is a dog who gets on the sofa or bed and becomes aggressive when you tell him to get off or ask him to move over. These dogs should not be allowed on the furniture unless you are working on the behavior modification below!

Teaching the "off" command

First, ask the dog to get on the sofa by patting the cushion encouraging him to jump up. When he does, praise him (no treat). Now lure him off of the sofa with a tasty treat. When he moves off, say "off" and then give him the treat (click & treat if using a marker signal). You will be pairing the word "off" with the action of getting off the furniture until he learns what the word means (this usually takes a couple dozen trials). Repeat this process a few times in a row. You will soon be able to use the cue "off" to prompt the behavior. Say "off" when he is on the furniture and reward him for getting down. **Do not use the word "down" for this training because this command means lie down to most dogs. Do not confuse him.**

If you have to show him the food treat to get him off the sofa the first few times that's fine but fade that out as soon as possible. We don't want him to require seeing the treat to move, we want him to move off because you ask him to.

Set up as many sessions as you can fit into the day so he learns this well. You may want to ask him to jump up and tell him to lie down before you ask him to get off, to better simulate the eventual real-life scenario.

After you have done many set-up sessions you can start using the "off" command in real life situations, when he is already on the couch. It's important to vary the treat. Taking the dog for a walk after asking him to "off" is very effective. Wait until the dog is comfortably lying on the couch. Say "off" and if he complies, then say "want to go for a walk?". DO NOT use the "want to go for a walk" as a way to get him off the couch. The walk is the reward for his compliance not a bribe to get to do the behavior.

Do these exercises over and over. Have everyone in the family practice. Your dog should get "off" whenever ANYONE asks.

Remember: If your dog aggressively guards furniture he should NOT be allowed on the furniture unless you are working on the behavior modification. A bed guarding dog who sneaks up on the bed in the night while you sleep should sleep in a crate or be tethered.

Counterconditioning

In addition to working on teaching your dog the "off" command you can start working on counterconditioning his feelings about you approaching, sitting next to or moving him when he is on the couch or bed.

1. When you see your dog on the furniture - walk up to him, staying a few feet away and *CLICK* if he doesn't aggress and toss the treat.
2. Repeat this over and over - moving closer each time (we want your dog to start anticipating a treat when he sees you coming)
3. Once you can walk right up to your dog, *CLICK* and hand him a treat - sit down next to him and feed him a few treats.
4. Eventually (when he is comfortable with you being next to him) touch him slightly and *CLICK* if he doesn't show aggression and give him a treat.
5. Repeat step 4 adding some petting.
6. When you can pet him and not elicit any aggression, nudge him a little and *CLICK* and treat for no aggression .
7. Repeat step 6 nudging a little harder each time.

Putting everything together:

You should now be able to either ask your dog to get "off" the furniture, or sit down next to him and push him over if you need more room, without eliciting aggression. If at any time your dog reverts back to his aggressive ways, go back and repeat the behavior modification. Surprising him with a treat every once in a while for not exhibiting aggression will help him remember the game.

***Response to aggression:**

Until your dog is reliable with these exercises he should be wearing a house line at all times. If you ask for an "off" and your dog becomes aggressive - say "too bad", pick up the end of the house line and pull him off the furniture (not in a rough harsh way) and tether him to something. He should then be banished from the furniture for a while.

Owner Guarding

Dogs often show what we would call "protective" behavior or "jealously" when they are with us. This behavior, which may become aggressive at times, is often directed towards other beings (humans or other animals) that get too close to you. This can be a form of resource guarding also because you, their wonderful human, are a very valuable resource.

Your response to this behavior is very important. If you sooth your dog by saying things like "It's okay Sugar - she's a nice lady" then you may be inadvertently reinforcing the behavior. Your dog thinks you like when she acts like that. Conversely, if you yell at or physically punish her for acting aggressively when someone comes close you are helping to form an even more negative association - 'I hate kids - and now I hate them even more because when they are around I get in trouble'.

The proper response to owner guarding behavior is for you, the object of the guarding, to get up and leave the room as a consequence of the aggressive behavior. Because dogs learn through the consequence of their behaviors (if the behavior is rewarded it will continue - if it is ignored it will go away) this is the most effective response. What you are doing is saying to the dog - when you become aggressive to someone in my presence I will leave (this is obviously not what the dog wants to happen).

If your dog is exhibiting aggression in these situations you should tether him/her during times when you expect people to come close. Put her leash on and hook the handle end onto something like a chair leg. This way when you get up and leave the room, she cannot follow you or go after the other person. Repeat this over and over until your dog realizes that it is her own aggressive behavior that is causing you to leave.

In addition to this response you also want to reward your dog for not acting aggressively when someone comes close. Have treats ready and when he acts appropriately - CLICK and give the treat. Eventually you can start having the approaching person toss the treats as they approach. By doing this, you will be slowly counterconditioning your dog to not only act differently when people approach, but also to feel differently. Now people or other dogs coming close predict good things and your dog will be happy about it.

****IMPORTANT NOTES:**

Try desperately to not trigger the resource guarding aggressive behavior. Every time your dog triggers to aggression the behavior gets stronger.

DO NOT punish the growl. The growl is communication ("STAY AWAY") and if you punish it your dog may simply increase his aggressive response to lunging, nipping or biting.

If your possessive aggressive dog won't drop it, leave it or play trade when he has an item - **LEAVE HIM ALONE** unless the item is dangerous to him or valuable to you.