

Golden Rule Training

What is Resource Guarding?

If a dog growls and snaps when approached while chewing a toy, eating or lying on a favorite spot, he is guarding what he considers a valuable resource. This behavior is known as "resource guarding."

Some dogs are prone to this because of temperament tendencies, while others have learned to this behavior is necessary; for instance, if the dog had been previously scolded or spanked by a human after he drops something, such as a shoe, he may associate the shoe as his and he now has to protect what he wants to keep. Dropping the shoe may not stop the behavior and some dogs may choose aggression in an attempt to back you off and keep the shoe. This is painfully familiar to many owners. This behavior can be a part of a general confusion about who leads and who follows in the home.

Leadership is vital when experiencing guarding issues. Establishing leadership with an adult, rescued dog is sometimes a longer process when you consider the time it takes to build a new trusting relationship. In addition, finding the balance between kindness and leadership is difficult for most people, it is best to enroll your dog in a positive-reinforcement training class. Even if your dog knows the basics, the training gives you and your dog a healthy new start to a trusting relationship.

Why does my dog guard food, toys and beds?

Like humans, dogs understand the concept of possession and ownership of resources. As in nature, dogs can take excessive measures to guard their resources. The types of resources can be numerous, but the most common and problematic, ones are usually food, objects (toys, chews, etc.) and particular locations such as their bed, your bed or their crate. Where resource guarding manifests itself in dangerous aggression, you should seek the advice of a professional behaviorist who can make a comprehensive assessment of the causes and develop a detailed corrective program. The intent of this article is to help prevent or aid minor cases of this behavior.

How to Stop Food Guarding

Food is the most common type of resource guarding. It is usually easy to spot and occurs when a dog is aggressive (or threatens to be) when approach while eating from their food bowl. It can also occur when an owner attempts to retrieve food items snatched or found by the dog. Dogs can also guard their empty food bowls.

First and most important, do not discipline your dog for food guarding; it will likely aggravate the situation because the dog may decide he needs to be more aggressive to retain this resource. The reason a dog guards his food is the fear that it is going to be taken away. Instead of increasing his fear, create a positive association with people approaching his food.

Action: The best way to change his perception is to tempt him away from his bowl with an even tastier treat (cheese, hotdog or chicken bits). Do this in small steps and start by keeping a distance from the food bowl, and let him take the treat and return to his bowl.

Over a number of sessions, gradually move closer and drop the treats directly into his bowl while he is eating. Next, offer the treats right next to the bowl while he is eating. Different people should carry out these exercises to avoid the positive associations with only one person.

How to Stop Toy and Object Guarding

Guarding of this nature usually relates to dog toy and dog chews, but can also relate to more obscure items such as laundry, tissues, food wrappers or objects found by the dog or have a particular smell. As with food guarding, building a positive association around people approaching the object is key. The dog needs to learn and understand that the family members can remove objects and that translates to more fun, excitement or a special treat.

Action:

Start by approaching your dog while near an unguarded low value object (not his favorite toy). Pick up the object with one hand then produce a treat from behind your back with the other and then give the object back to him and walk away. Repeat this, but change the angle of approach and intervals between approaches.

Work on this over a number of sessions, then change the exercise so that as you offer the object back to the dog, as soon as they touch it, withdraw it again, and then praise and treat, then give the object back. Gradually start to use more valued objects. Start by moving the exercise when the dog is preoccupied with another toy or object. Always remember to keep it positive and that the removal of resources results in even more positive experience.

Another exercise is to introduce the concept of sharing. This works particularly well with chew toys; you offer a chew toy to your dog, but keep holding the other end yourself. Allow your dog to enjoy the chew, but after a period, take it away for a few minutes, and then offer it back. Your dog soon understands that the resource is not his, but he is allowed to share the object. Practice this with different people and objects to ensure he understands how to share.

How to Stop Location Guarding

Although not as common, some dogs show aggressive behavior while in a particular location. The most common locations are typically their sleeping area, which could be their bed or crate, your bed or the sofa. Typically, the location he may be guarding depends on the value of the resource coupled with who is approaching. For example, a dog may allow a child to approach but not an adult. Alternatively, perhaps a woman can approach, but not a man.

Action: Remove anything he may protect. If you cannot remove the item (such as a bed or couch), block access to it by closing a door or putting up a gate. Keep him on lead in the house so you can more easily control him. Teach him to "leave it" in a positive, fun way.

Do not create a scuffle; instead, approach it as an opportunity for a reward, not a chance to lock horns with you. Always start teaching this command with boring objects so that praise and treats will be the obvious choice. People become angry when their dog takes things they should not, but then fail to give him a way to please them, which perpetuates aggression. Owners can

inadvertently create a situation where, once something is in their dog's mouth, there is no way for the dog to win. This can force the dog to start defending himself.

Dogs with a tendency for location guarding should not be allowed to sleep on the bed, the sofa, etc. Sleeping in the same place as the pack leader (that is you!) may give your dog a higher sense status within the pack hierarchy. Not only can this cause guarding, but it can also cause other issues such as difficulties with training and general challenging behavior (for more information, please see the Leadership article under the Golden Rule Training Library at www.homewardboundgoldens.org).

If your dog is difficult to remove from the furniture and is starting to growl when asked to "get down", please see a qualified dog trainer for assistance.

More Tips for Resource Guarding in an Adult Dog

- Once something is in your dog's mouth, it is TOO LATE to teach him not to take it. The only thing you can teach him now is to drop it immediately. Teach your dog to "drop it" and then reward him. Start teaching him "drop it" by offering another, more valued toy or treat, making it a positive experience.
- Teach him "take then give. Practice "out" with your pup: Walk up when he is chewing a toy and say, "out", and take the toy and then praise him for his brilliance. Immediately give him a treat. Return the toy and walk away. A few weeks of this once or twice a day and your dog will want you to come and take him toys.
- If your dog is lying in your way, do not step over him, instead, teach him to move out of YOUR way. This leadership exercise will help him understand you lead and he follows. If it is safe to do, simply shuffle your feet into him (no kicking) until he moves then praise him (you can also leave a lead on him and guide out of the way then praise).
- He owns nothing! He has no "favorite" chair or toys that are "his", everything in the house is yours. If he is protective over anything, a bowl or a toy, remove it until his attitude has improved.
- Remember, the higher up he is in the room, the higher up he is in his head. His place is on the floor. Teach him to get off things on command and always praise him cheerfully for obeying. If needed, close off rooms and or leave a lead on him so you can manage him more easily. Always praise him cheerfully for obeying, positive reinforcement is important!
- Increase his exercise; exercise will help relieve stress and release excess energy. Be sure to play games that promote cooperation and control, for dogs with guarding issues, do not play tug-of-war, wrestling, keep-away and chasing after him.
- Do Not battle over a squeaky toy! Your dog, no matter how small, can injure you. When a dog shows he is ready to battle a human, we already know that he is misinformed and confused. If you attack him for threatening to attack you, you may escalate his aggression. Even if you "win", he may decide to fight sooner and harder next time. What he needs is to learn how to behave, not attack.
- Anytime your dog threatens you, hands-on help from a qualified professional is the best next step. Aggression is complicated and, if it is not dealt with quickly, can get worse. In the end, it can lead to the death of your dog assuredly as any disease.

Sources:

www.dogguide.net/food-guarding.php

Pat Miller; Sept. 2008 issue of Your Dog, published by Tufts University's School of Veterinary Medicine (<http://www.tuftsyourdog.com>).

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