



# Resource Guarding in Dogs

## Awareness, Prevention & Management

A very common and often misunderstood behavior challenge is resource guarding. Resource guarding is a label used to describe when an animal uses their body position and behavior to block another animal's access to, or move them away from a desired item. For most, the resource is often food, but it can also be access to a particular space, toy or person. As a survival skill, it's important to be able to keep access to valuable things, all species of animal do this in one way or another. When dogs guard from humans or other dogs, they are protecting an item, not attempting to establish themselves over the other being. It's far simpler than that. They just want to have their cookie in peace.

### Awareness

If we can take a moment to understand human behavior, we can likely better understand resource guarding in our pets. Humans have given paper money a value. Many humans learn the value of money at a young age. We often learn that it is not always accessible and that in addition to being traded for a valuable item, it can also be easily lost or taken. Many of us are comfortable with our close family or inner circle being aware of where our money is kept or how much of it is available. However, if we have had multiple learning events or one event of significance, around the loss of money, we may be more concerned about where it is kept and whether anybody knows about it. Perhaps this would be the case if you had siblings who often took your money. Some of us may have never had a negative learning event around money, but are still protective of its whereabouts. Perhaps we were conditioned by our family members to be vigilant about our money. We may become superstitious about where it's kept, we may become tense or uncomfortable if others are aware of it and we may become defensive to perceived threats against its safety. Many of us would choose an assortment of behaviors and may escalate our response based on the perceived or consistent threat. For example, we may first move it to a new location, then perhaps hide it by placing things in front of or over it, then we may stand between it and any perceived intruder, we may even sleep beside it. If there is an imminent threat, we may become defensive and ask someone to move away. If the threat does not move away, we may take the opportunity to become offensive and chase or scare the intruder away. If this still does not thwart the threat, we may become aggressive.

This escalation of protective behavior is almost identical to how our dogs would protect a valuable resource. Dogs offer avoidance signals, then stress behaviors like pacing, panting and whining, they may relocate an item repeatedly displaying stress behaviors in between. These behaviors don't quite mean that your dog will actively guard something, but if you can pick up on the stress signals in relation to specific items, you'll better understand the value your dog places on these items.

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Caching is the behavior pattern where your dog attempts to hide a food item. This is the famous behavior of burying bones. A dog may cache their item because they consider it to be high value and are either not comfortable enough to eat it, or are not interested in it at the moment, but want to keep it around for later. Some dogs will stress over where they should hide the bone and never be comfortable enough to eat it. If this is your dog, try offering something of less high of a value or setting them up in a safe space, alone, where they can relax enough to enjoy it.

Body language that indicates guarding is typically when the dog places their chest over an item. You may see them chewing the item and while you approach they pause and stretch their head over the item, keeping their head low and raising their eyes to watch you pass. This body language would indicate guarding and serves as a signal for you to move away.

### **Prevention**

While resource guarding is an understandable behavior, it can still become a serious issue. It can especially become an issue if families are unaware of the body language associated with guarding or the safe ways to intervene. It's important to assume that your new dog will likely guard things. If we operate off of this assumption, everyone is likely to remain successful and our dogs will be less likely to display guarding behaviors.

Guarding behaviors are more often seen in situations where our dogs do not have a trusting relationship. This may be due to being in a new situation, like an adoptive or foster home, or may be due to having multiple learning experiences that tell them not to trust humans or other animals near their items. No matter your dog's previous experience, you can help build a strong, trusting relationship by creating positive learning associations from the moment they step into your home. You can do this in a few ways:

- Assume that your dog may feel uncomfortable being approached while he is eating. Adjust for this by feeding your dog away from busy spaces. While the kitchen floor is often a smart choice, for easy clean up, the kitchen is often one of the busiest spaces in the home. Rushing past your dog to get in and out of the fridge is likely going to make your dog feel uncomfortable. Additionally, as you'll likely have your hands full and be focused on your own task, you're unlikely to be mindful of your dog's body language or be able to properly supervise other approaching family members. Instead, be sure to set your dog up in a space away from other resident animals. You can do this by feeding in a bathroom, behind a baby gate, in a dog crate, or even on the back porch. We don't want to teach your new resident that they need to remain vigilant to intruders while eating. Eating should be a relaxing and safe activity.
- Assume that your dog may feel uncomfortable being approached while he has something of value, whether that be something given or found. It's best not to rush up to investigate, but instead, to lure or call your dog to move away. Often, in our urgency, we will rush over to the

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dog and may reach or grab for them quickly. Most dogs don't appreciate this and while they may tolerate it in the moment, they may become concerned on your next approach.

- Trade, trade, trade! Trade your dog for items of equal or greater value. Perhaps your new dog just figured out that the kids like to leave socks on the floor and socks make great dog toys. Try grabbing a squeaky toy and tossing it for them to chase before picking up the sock. Chasing them around for the sock will either make the game of grabbing found items even more fun, or teach them that you can be scary and unpredictable. Trading for an appropriate item helps teach the dog what we want them to play with. Take note of the things your dog is finding and plan to arrange your environment to prevent the continued treasure hunting. Review the management section for tips on how to arrange the environment safely.
- Practice teaching your dog that your approach is a positive thing! If your dog happens to be nearby and enjoying a delicious item or a toy, pass by them, at a comfortable distance, and toss them something tasty. They're likely to come and investigate you and may even leave their valuable behind. If it's a safe item to leave them with, then leave them alone to enjoy. If it's something that they shouldn't have or something that needs to be removed, reinforce them for coming to you and then toss a bonus treat in the opposite direction so that you can easily retrieve the item. They're soon going to realize that you've repossessed the valuable item, so toss out another reward and remove the item from the space. Your dog learned four valuable lessons during this interaction:
  1. "People bring me good things."
  2. "People near my items is a good thing."
  3. "It's okay to move away from my valuable item."
  4. "I get more when people take my thing."

If you're unsure of situations where you could create these training moments, here are some things pets may consider worth defending: their food bowl, resting spaces, bones, rawhides, toys and other stress-relieving items, access to the kitchen or areas where food is often dropped (i.e.: under the cutting board or high chair). Chewing and licking are stress relieving behaviors, so items designed for those activities may become more valuable to a dog who uses them to pacify or displace stress.

The really amazing thing about training our dogs is that the behaviors that are reinforced will continue. So while the above training moment sounded like we might be reinforcing the dog for doing nothing, that's kind of the point! Not every training moment is about teaching a new behavior, some training moments are about keeping the behaviors that we like. If we're consistently approaching and removing items from our dogs, we're teaching them that our approach is a negative thing. When we remove something they like, it's actually considered a form of punishment. Similar to if your parent approached you and took your ice cream cone. If this happened a few times, you may change your opinion about ice cream altogether and decide you no longer enjoy it and therefore you don't even want it when it's offered. You might also become sensitized to the interaction and begin displaying

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signs of stress or defensiveness while eating the ice cream, you may try to eat it as fast as you can, to avoid losing it.

### **Prevention in Play**

There are ways to play that can help bolster our dog's understanding that a human's approach adds good things, rather than takes good things away. One of these games is to play fetch, but use two toys. The game of fetch, becomes a game of trade. Trading items of similar value or greater value keeps the game fun and helps to prevent building tension or discomfort. You can also use treats to teach your dog to "drop" toys on cue as another form of trading. Offer a treat and the dog is likely to spit out the toy to eat the treat, then toss the toy and start the pattern again.

Tug of War is another fun game that can teach trade, as well as work on your dog's self-control. Try offering the toy and keeping minimal tension for up to three seconds, then let go of the toy. If the dog takes the toy and moves away, he wasn't enjoying the game. If he approaches again, go ahead and grab the tug, after three seconds offer a treat and relieve the tension. If there is continued tension on the toy, your dog will continue to tug, so it's very important to eliminate any tugging. Offer them the treat, then immediately re-offer the toy. It's important for your dog to learn that tug-of-war is a fun game that everyone wins at some times, not an all-out competition that leads to stress. Be sure to keep the rope parallel to the ground to lower the chance that your dog jumps up on you, or that you hit yourself should your dog release. Additionally, keeping the toy at your dog's level causes less strain to their body.

### **Management**

Management, in Dog Training, refers to the prevention of practice of inappropriate behavior by adjusting the environment. If your dog continues to demonstrate guarding behaviors, it is due to their continued feelings of threat and their continued practice of managing these stressful interactions. The best way to prevent further practice is to adjust their experience to eliminate their need to protect their item. Once management is in place, training can be successful. Without management, training sessions are unlikely to create behavior change, as the dog is continuously practicing their old habit of response.

In an earlier example we mentioned a dog that finds objects around the house. If you notice that a dog has "found" similar items more than twice, it might be worth reviewing the household setup. You could try changing the location or the storage container for the items. If there is no official storage location, there may need to be. Perhaps you typically leave the bread loaf on the counter top, but your new dog has just learned they are tall enough to help themselves to it, you may benefit from a bread bin or placing the bread loaf in a cabinet. If clothing items are the treasure, perhaps the laundry bins could be taller, or strategically placed where the dog is unable to get to them. Maybe it's time to replace that

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open trash can with a covered can. Maybe the dog food bin needs a spin-tight lid or to be stored in the pantry. Perhaps it's best to put a baby gate up to block the baby's room or use an exercise pen to separate the toddler's play space and the dog's space. Many toddler and baby toys closely resemble the texture and appearance of dog toys. The best way for your dog to distinguish what toys are "his" may be their location.

### **Management and Multiple Dog**

If you have multiple dogs in your home, practice management by feeding them separately and offering high value items, like specialty chews, when they are separated by a barrier. Barriers can be actual doors, baby gates, dog crates or even tethers, if supervised. Dogs who are new to each other, are building a relationship in the same way that your newly adopted dog is building a relationship with the humans in the household. They need to build comfort in each other's presence to help lower the likelihood of resource guarding between them. Eliminate moments of competition and take advantage of moments where you can focus on building relationships around things they may see as valuable. One way to help with this is to make sure there are multiple toys of similar value present. This way there isn't only one squeaky toy or one tennis ball. Before introducing toys between the dogs, take some time to learn what toys they each prefer. If they each prefer to fetch the tennis ball. It may be best to play that game individually and remove the tennis ball when they're having time together. Once their relationship is a bit more established, you could bring tennis balls back into the equation, but be sure to have more than enough and engage them each with a ball to play with separately, while together. Chasing after the same ball might be fun for some dogs, but many don't appreciate being chased down while they're chasing a toy down. Watch for communication between the dogs during these interactions. Sustained *side eye* or freezing and staring should be interrupted. The dogs may need a moment apart and to have the toys removed until they can settle back down.

It's important not to scold dogs for communicating with each other, but instead to calmly separate them by calling them away and removing the source of the competition. It's normal for dogs to growl, show teeth or even freeze – this is important communication. However, it's just as important that we listen to these cues. If one or both dogs are consistently telling the other to give them space, or go away, then the dogs are not comfortable. Not acknowledging these warning signals, by adjusting how they interact, can brew into a much larger issue. Intervening when the dogs are displaying warning signals and managing their environment can prevent an altercation. If an altercation occurs, it's important to be aware of the things that led up to it so these things can be adjusted before they are re-introduced.

### **Read Warning Labels**

When dogs guard from other dogs or from people, the intention is to protect their item, space or personal being. If your dog ever displays behavior indicating they may aggress, respect their display and take a step back. Scolding or punishing our dogs for performing species-appropriate behaviors

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which are designed as a visible and audible warning system to incoming threats, will dissolve your relationship with your dog and will likely lead to fewer warnings in the future. *When dogs are punished for giving warning signals, the underlying cause of the behavior does not change, we simply remove the warning labels and sirens.*

If you notice your dog freezing or posturing over items, growling at human or pet members of the household or showing significant signs of stress around a space or object, reach out to a training professional. There are many certified, positive reinforcement trainers who can help support you, your dog and your household to build a stronger trusting relationship, repair damaged relationships and improve your management strategies. The behavior department at ARF would be happy to assist you in managing and modifying guarding behaviors or assist you in finding a professional that can serve you

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