

Dog: Food and Resource Guarding



What Is Resource Guarding Behavior?

Resource guarding behavior is a demonstration of possessiveness around any thing or place the dog considers valuable and is afraid to lose: toys, food, bones, sleeping spots, garbage, even the TV remote control. It's a common and natural response, but in a modern human environment it's unpleasant—and can be unsafe.

What Possessiveness Looks Like

- Your dog runs off with certain toys (or other things) and may hide somewhere far from people to enjoy them.
- Your dog uses her body to prevent you from touching the toy. She may do this by lying on it, firmly putting her feet on it, or moving her body so you can't get to it.
- Your dog's body stiffens and/or she stares at you nervously when you approach her.
- Your dog snarls, growls or snaps when trying to remove the item.

Fortunately, it's possible to change how a dog feels about sharing things. Below are some simple exercises to help decrease your dog's natural level of distrust and make her see you as generous and giving.

Note: If your dog growls, air-snaps, or bites you over favorite things or food, don't try the exercises. Consult a professional for a safe, reward based and non-confrontational behavior modification program.

Exercises

NOTHING IN LIFE IS FREE

This simple training principle is a great way to build a stronger relationship with your dog, encourage polite manners, and teach your dog that all good things come from you. It boils down to this: Whatever your dog wants, don't give it away for free. Ask for a simple command such as sit before providing your dog with anything he might want, such as putting down the food bowl, throwing a ball, giving a chew toy, opening a door, handing over a toy, etc.

BONUSES

Often, when people approach a dog enjoying a toy or her food, it's to take the enjoyable thing away. No wonder the dog starts to see people approaching as bad news. Instead, try approaching your dog partway in such a situation and tossing her a small piece of cheese or liver treat—something extra yummy. Then turn and leave her in peace.

FOOD BOWL BONUSES

After practicing the above exercise for a few days, you're ready to start adding fabulous bonus treats directly to your dog's food bowl. One way to do this is to feed handful by handful: Put a handful of food in your dog's bowl and move away. When she has finished eating that and the bowl is empty, approach the bowl and add another handful of kibble and some special treats. You can feed an entire meal this way.

REWARD THE RESPONSE

After you have spent some time practicing the two exercises above, you'll start to see your dog's reaction as you approach her food bowl change. She will look up at you in an eager,

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excited way and may wag her tail. Reward her with praise and treats from your hand when you see this response—this lets your dog know you like her reaction and it helps make it even stronger.

TRADE UP

Find an object your dog is comfortable with you picking up, for example a toy she isn't interested in or her food bowl when it's empty, and practice trade-ups. A trade-up shows your dog that whenever you take something of hers, she gets something even better in exchange. Pick up the toy, give your dog an extra-yummy treat from the other hand, and then immediately return the toy to her. Do frequent trade-ups with anything your dog is comfortable with you taking and returning.

Note about dogs and kids: All dog-child interactions should be supervised by an adult. Dogs that show possessiveness need even closer supervision and strict rules—for example not letting the child be around the dog when she is eating.

Be Patient, Practice Avoidance

Building a trusting relationship with your dog is important and takes time. While you do this, it's crucial for everyone's safety to avoid conflict.

In addition to training and supervision, try to set up your home environment so your dog won't have access to things that may cause her to feel possessive. If she finds something to guard from you, avoid conflict by tossing a few treats and then taking the object when she moves away from the item.

Until you're completely sure your dog is comfortable with people near all her toys, food, and treats, monitor her behavior closely for signs of nervousness.