



## Resource Guarding in Dogs

Many dogs will attempt to defend a resource in their possession, such as food, bones, toys, stolen items, or sometimes a person or a location (e.g., a bed). Possessive behavior, often referred to as resource guarding, can be directed towards humans or other dogs. Dogs that resource guard often display the following behaviors towards the person or dog approaching or touching them or their resource:

- Eating faster or chewing more intensely.
- Freezing or lowering their head over the food or item.
- Hunkering over the food or item, sometimes while holding eye contact with the person or dog.
- Growling, showing teeth, lunging, snapping, or biting.\*

*\*It is important to notice the more subtle cues before they escalate to these more overt behaviors.*

Even if your dog has not displayed resource guarding behaviors, we highly recommend everyone follow these guidelines with every dog:

- **Don't touch, pet, or disturb your dog when eating** from the food bowl or chewing on a rawhide, bone, or toy.
- If your dog has displayed resource guarding behavior, **don't give him delicious chews** such as rawhides or pig's ears. Instead, give less delicious chew toys like non-edible Nylabones. Your dog will be less likely to guard them.
- If your dog has displayed resource guarding behavior, **feed him in a crate or separate room**. When your dog's food bowl is empty, pick it up and put it away. Feed meals instead of leaving the dog food out all day.
- If your dog guards stolen items or trash, **prevent him from getting these items** in the first place, for instance, by putting trash cans in closets.
- **Do not touch your dog when sleeping**. If your dog has a history of growling when resting or sleeping, do not allow your dog on your bed or furniture. Give your dog a dog bed instead.
- If you need to move your dog **while resting or sleeping, don't physically pick up or push him**. Instead, wake up your dog up with your voice or toss a delicious treat away from the dog and resting area. When your dog follows the treat, praise him. Alternatively, allow your dog to wear a lightweight leash in the house when you are home. When you want to move your dog, pick up the leash and walk away.
- If your dog steals something, **don't chase or reprimand**. Instead, toss a delicious treat away from the dog and stolen item. When your dog drops the stolen item, praise him.
- If your dog is not possessive over toys, **teaching a game of "fetch and drop"** is a great exercise and helps to teach your dog to release items on cue.
- Practice "Say please." All family members should **ask your dog to sit before they do anything for him**: Before petting, greeting, leashing, opening the door, playing, putting the food bowl down, or giving a treat.
- **Advise all family members and visitors to follow the same rules**. Do not leave food or chews around when visitors are at your house.

## Animal behavior questions?

## Contact our FREE Behavior Helpline!

402-905-3421 | [bhelp@nehumanesociety.org](mailto:bhelp@nehumanesociety.org) | [www.nehumanesociety.org/behaviorhelp](http://www.nehumanesociety.org/behaviorhelp)

## Resource Guarding – Fact or Fiction

### 1. Resource guarding is a 'normal' canine behavior.

**Fact** Resource guarding is genetically hardwired in dogs' brains since it was (and still) is an important survival skill for dogs. Prior to modern times (and still for feral populations), if dogs didn't guard their food from others, they didn't eat. Dogs' learning histories and life experiences can also make them more likely to guard their resources, like dogs that lacked access to food and singleton puppies that never learned to share.

### 2. Dogs guard their resources in an attempt to be 'dominant' over people, so they need to be shown who is 'in charge'.

**Fiction** Dogs that resource guard are not trying to be 'alpha', but have an instinct to protect their resources and are simply afraid you'll take their stuff, so they're trying to tell you - in their own language - to stop. If a dog feels fearful or threatened by a person or another dog approaching their food, punishing or reprimanding the dog for giving those subtle or overt cues will only cause them to feel more threatened by others approaching them while eating, which can cause their guarding behavior to escalate over time.

### 3. Picking up a dog's food bowl (or taking its bone away) and then giving it back will teach a dog that nothing bad happens when someone takes their resources.

**Fiction** Actually, this can cause or worsen guarding behaviors. As you can imagine, it would be pretty annoying to have someone come take your dinner plate from you, then give it back, then take it again. If your dog is trying to eat to only be interrupted by you taking their food bowl, they may eventually view you as a threat to their resources and consequently guard their food or other items from you.

### 4. Resolving resource guarding involves giving dogs food rewards while eating or chewing.

**Fact** To treat resource guarding, we have to change the dog's emotional response (fear), so they understand that someone approaching their bowl/item is a good thing. This type of training involves tossing the dog high-value treats as he/she is engaged with a resource, so the dog comes to associate people getting close to the item with a positive consequence. True behavior modification of food guarding behavior should be done under the supervision of a certified dog trainer, and aversive methods (e.g., shock/e-collars) should never be used, as they will make guarding tendencies much worse. For more information on behavior modification techniques for resource guarding, check out the book *Mine!* by Jean Donaldson.

### 5. Shelter behavior assessments predict with 100% accuracy if a dog will resource guard in its new home.

**Fiction** Food tests during shelter behavior assessments involve touching a dog with a fake hand while eating, then pulling the food bowl away from the dog. Not all dogs receive this test, but for those that do, it is important to note that a dog's reaction to this test does not necessarily guarantee or predict future guarding behavior. Many dogs that guard in their shelter behavior assessment will not do so in their new home, and some that *do not* guard in the shelter will go on to do so in their new home. For that reason, we suggest that whether or not your dog has displayed food guarding behavior in the past, you follow the recommendations given here.

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