

Take It or Leave It: The Bone of Contention Resource Guarding in Dogs



By Pat Blocker, CPDT-KA
Owner, Peaceful Paws

Note: This article is intended to enlighten readers on the issue of resource guarding in dogs and is not intended as a do-it-yourself treatment program. Resource guarding is serious and should be treated by an experienced, reputable trainer or behaviorist.

Recently I had dinner with some very hungry friends at an Ethiopian restaurant. Culinary custom dictated that there were no utensils on the table, except for a solitary serving fork. One eager diner commented that the fork had better be moved before someone got stabbed! This behavior is called resource guarding.

Dogs aren't genetically programmed to share, yet they're demonized for natural, resource-guarding behavior. We expect dogs to guard our property, but not theirs, as in guard my vintage kazoo collection, but not your rawhide bone. Resource guarding should be taken very seriously with dogs because of their potential to do bodily harm. In the case of the eager diner, the fork would have been the weapon with which to guard the resource. Dogs might use their only choice of weaponry: their teeth.

In addition to food, some dogs guard objects such as toys or stolen items (e.g., dirty socks). Other bones of contention might be locations such as feeding areas and beds. Some dogs will protect their own body parts from being handled and some guard their people.

As the hungry diner warned us about the risk of being maimed by flatware, dogs often signal their intent with the gift of growl. Additionally, dogs use other more subtle signals like freezing, accelerated consumption of food, or placing the chin or paw over objects. Dogs use these signals before resorting to a bite.

Common Resource Guarding Myths

- Resource guarding is a genetic predisposition, which is therefore unalterable.
- Resource guarding is a natural behavior in dogs—a measure to preserve the species.
- Resource guarding is about dominance. Dominance is a state, not a trait. Counter-conditioning and desensitization are highly successful treatments for resource guarding. One cannot counter-condition or desensitize a personality trait, thus rendering the question of dominance here, a moot point.
- Resource guarding is a result of spoiling a dog. The term spoiled is often a description of (or an excuse for) a dog with bad manners. Resource guarding is seen in dogs with varied histories and sterling manners. It follows that spoiled dogs are not necessarily resource guarders.
- He'll be cured because resources are abundant. Human logic doesn't seem to apply here. Furthermore, matters can be made worse by providing unlimited access to food, furniture, toys, or anything the dog guards, leaving the unsuspecting victim in harm's way at any given moment.
- He won't bite. If pushed beyond his limits, even the most affable dog can and will bite. Period.
- Avoidance management will offer a permanent solution. The truth is avoidance management can and will fail. Period.
- He'll outgrow it. No, he won't.

Management

Management is essential for safety and the treatment of resource guarding behavior. Some management tools may be useful on a continuing basis, but no amount of management should be substituted for sound training. Furthermore, management preserves the integrity of the treatment program. No failure, no backsliding.

Set your dog up for success by removing all resource-guarding triggers possible. Pick up toys, chew bones and food bowls when not in use. If the dog guards furniture or locations, disallow access to them.

Make sure that the dog stays under threshold at all times. If he growls when you come within three feet of his bowl during meals, then don't get that close. For now, we don't want the dog to rehearse the old behavior, so avoid the conflict.

If an unavoidable situation does arise, such as the dog stealing a piece of trash, do what you must do within the realm of

safety. This would be a good time for bribery; offer your dog something of higher value in exchange for the found item.

If management has failed and your dog has gained access to a guarded location, like your bed, just ignore him until he gets off. Another plan would be to casually call him to another room for a tasty treat. These management mishaps are not training moments, but merely a means to stay safe and avoid conflict.

Preparing for Treatment

Before your trainer or behaviorist begins a treatment plan, you will want to prepare by doing the following:

Identification

Get ready for training by first making a list of all items, food and locations that your dog guards. Do this in order of hierarchy from the lowest to highest level of value to your dog. Also, make a list of items and locations that your dog does not guard for use as practice trials before beginning the treatment program.

Variables

After identifying the actual triggers, we need to determine existing variables surrounding the given triggers. It's important to recognize these variables so that we can predict the intensity of the guarding behavior and design a treatment protocol in which the dog will remain under threshold.

Approach

Some dogs' reactions differ with how they're approached. Distance, angle and speed of approach can trigger a more intense display of aggression. Note whether a straight-on approach, eye contact, approach from behind, entering from an out-of-sight location, or close up elicits a stronger reaction.

Also, consider who is doing the approaching. It's important for all capable family members, (under an expert's supervision) to work with the dog's treatment. In addition, dogs need help to generalize new behaviors. If the dog is not comfortable around children, then he'd likely regress if an unfamiliar child were to approach.

Note: The presence of children in the home raises the stakes exponentially. Management is difficult, if not impossible, in a busy family household and young children cannot realistically be expected to follow protocol. In serious cases, tough decisions may need to be made. Re-homing the dog to a childless household or even euthanasia can be the most humane choice in extreme cases.

Duration

It's easier to take possession of that guarded chew bone when the dog has had it for five seconds as opposed to five minutes. Once he is "in the zone" with an item, relinquishing it becomes more difficult.

Finders Keepers

Many dogs cherish found items more than their everyday, always-available toys. The sock that escaped from the dryer on laundry day is treasure to be vigorously guarded.

Escalation

Aggression will likely escalate if the dog is challenged while presenting resource-guarding behavior. Be above conflict, remembering that aggression begets aggression.

Learning New Behaviors

Trainers often recommend teaching certain behaviors that are helpful in the treatment protocol. Dogs may learn commands such as off, move, drop it, leave it and fetch. These behaviors are useful either because they are incompatible with resource guarding behavior, or they turn the former guarding situation into a new, fun game instead.

Resource guarding in dogs is treatable, but not always an easy fix. Understanding the behavior and treatment protocols is paramount to success and safety. Human logic in sharing does not apply in the canine world. Hungry humans don't usually accost their tablemates over appetizers, but in a dog's world, it's not just about hunger, it's about survival. It's not simply a matter of take it or leave it.

Pat Blocker, CPDT-KA, is a certified professional dog trainer with over 18 years experience. She offers private in-home training, group classes and specializes in solving canine behavior issues. For more information, please call 303-364-4681 or visit www.peacefulpaws.net.



Paws 'n' Play
Devoted to
helping you find the
right food and products
for your pets...

7403 Grandview Avenue
• Olde Town Arvada •
303-420-2525
www.pawsnplay.com
Locally Owned & Operated