



Resource guarding

Key points

- Resource guarding is normal. All dogs have the potential to be resource guarders.
- It starts out as mild in most cases but gets worse if there is confrontation.
- Prevention is best, but even extreme guarders can be helped.

Resource guarding

Guarding Valuable Resources is natural. If I have a box of chocolates, I may happily choose to share them with friends or family by inviting people to have one. But if someone comes along and tries to take a chocolate without being invited to, I may speak sharply or even reach out to stop them.

Resources can include food, toys, objects, locations, a person, another dog or just about anything.

Some people expect that their dog should tolerate having people take their food from them. Some dogs tolerate these things, some don't. Some dogs tolerate it initially but then have had enough.

If resources get touched or taken away, the dog learns that they lose their resources unless they take action.

Many dogs will show low levels of guarding behaviour at times. In general it's nothing sinister or evil, they are doing it because they want to or they have learned that they can.

Types of resource guarding

Food guarding is the most common. It is often triggered by the dog having a high value item that takes time to consume or chew, such as a bone or long-lasting chew.

Object guarding is dependent on that object's value to that dog. It may include favourite toys, or just about anything - from hairbrushes to bags to pencils, to amorphous stuff found on walks. Gus once guarded some badger poo he was rolling in.

Dogs naturally guard resources from other dogs. They growl and the other dog moves away – no problem. Trouble only ensues when the other dog doesn't move away and retaliates.

Location guarding can include guarding of beds, furniture, crates, a particular area of the home, doorways, a hole dug in garden...anywhere. It's pretty normal for dogs not to appreciate being disturbed when they are on their comfy beds too – which has led to the saying "let sleeping dogs lie".

Owner guarding might be towards people and/or towards other dogs, more commonly the latter. It may be mild – the dog moving across in front of their owner as another dog or person approaches, or you may get the full gamut of guarding signs.

Some dogs will guard another dog.

Some will guard things from another dog.

Factors that influence guarding

- Genetics and breed - terriers can be "hot", malamutes are argumentative, guarding breeds.... guard
- Learned behaviour – often a taught behaviour, such as a human taking a food bowl away
- Hormones – ah, adolescence!
- Social development periods – dogs are more prone to start guarding at particular developmental stages. Great socialisation is protective
- Stress and fear
- Physiological factors (arousal)



Signs of resource guarding

Dogs who bring toys or food towards people in a relaxed fashion, have slow movements, stay near people or other dogs when eating, chewing or playing, chew or eat at a steady rate and keep a soft body when playing are dogs where guarding the thing has not even crossed their minds.

Tease and guard is one common style – a dog may present an item to another dog or human, then turn or run away with it, or they may parade with an item.

Watch your dog! Notice the dog who is not happy with what is going on but is asking ever so politely if we wouldn't mind stopping that now please. These subtle signs of communication include head turns, whale eye, lip licking, speed eating, low tail wags, yawning. Watch for dogs who move or run away with an item, hiding things or taking them to a bed or special place, or marking something using their face or shoulder. These signs can easily go unnoticed - so the dog has to ask more forcefully. Then they might growl, show their teeth, or snarl, or snap.

Management

Resource guarding starts out mild in most cases - and it may never progress. It increases through confrontation (by human or another dog) – so avoid all confrontation.

Food guarding is common. All puppy owners should teach food manners – to teach puppies that people approaching their food bowl always ADD, never take away. (I hope I need not say that the practice of taking food away from the puppy is stupid and may well be a trigger for resource guarding later on.)

Prevention, management and supervision are the ways to control it.

1. Prevent where possible – Use a lead or long line when out in the garden, put objects away. Keep the food bowl in a quiet area, not the kitchen
2. Supervise your dog well - and never leave things lying around!
3. Always call your dog to come to you off their bed or wherever they're asleep/resting if you want to give them a fuss

Training tips

Build (or re-build) an excellent relationship with your dog. Teach them they have nothing to fear.

If the object is safe or not valuable, one option is to leave your dog with it (e.g. stick in the garden) and go and pick it up once they have left it. Always choose the simple option if available. NB Trading for a high value reward may or may not work but may be useful in emergencies

Training options: leave (= don't touch it)
 drop (= let go)
 recall (= come away)
 retrieve or bring (=fetch it and exchange for high value food/toy)

Treating established resource guarding is beyond the scope of this help sheet.

A book called "MINE" – by Jean Donaldson is worth getting if you need more help, or book a good dog behaviourist to help you.

Take all training SLOWLY – think safety, build trust and develop confidence. Teach your dog that a high value thing plus a human is A Good Thing.

Finally: Never, ever try to lure the dog away with a treat or use trickery