

Mine! Resource Guarding

By Jessica Beganski



Dogs have lived alongside humans for thousands of years, now living within our homes. Despite this close relationship, dogs retain some primitive behaviors, such as resource guarding, that don't fit within the human home. If left unchecked, resource guarding can be one of the most dangerous dog behaviors.

Resource guarding is a series of behaviors dogs display to warn others to stay away from something they find valuable. Dogs can guard any item they think has value – food, toys, people and places are all common items. And many times, it is the very act of stealing an item that can cause a dog to guard it. Furthermore, dogs with the lowest self-esteem seem to guard because they feel compelled to take control.

Why Do Dogs Guard Resources?

Dogs are descendants of wolves but the differences in wolf and dog behavior have always confounded dog behaviorists. Where wolves work cooperatively within a pack to hunt food and share it among the pack members, domesticated dogs guard their food from other dogs. According to Marie Joyner, Our Companions Canine Operations Director and lead trainer, the recent discovery of the canine “missing link” uncovers an explanation for resource guarding.

Called the village dog, the closest relation to the domestic dog attached itself to humans as a means to survival, living off of our garbage. The village dog worked independently to find food and did not share resources with other dogs. At this time, the village dog also developed a relationship with humans.

Even with this explanation, resource guarding is incongruous in the home where most dogs have their every need met. Despite having ample food, toys and attention, certain dogs will guard any object they find valuable even if that object is in plentiful supply or readily accessible to them.

Signs of Resource Guarding

Dogs have developed an elaborate system of communication that tells people everything we need to know if we just know what the signs mean. Most dog owners are familiar with the obvious signs of resource guarding: growling, stealing or even biting. Before a dog gets to this point, however, he will most likely display one or all of these less obvious signals to you or another dog to tell you to back off:

- Eating food rapidly or hovering over food dish
- Burying items or digging with the intent to bury
- Stiffened body

- Worried expression
- Standing position with nose to ground, looking at object he is guarding
- Putting himself in between object he is guarding and another dog or person

Dangers of Resource Guarding

In order to have harmony in a home with a dog, the dog must respect people and other pets in the home. For practical and safety reasons, owners must be able to take items away from a dog and not be in danger. If a dog openly challenges a person by growling or biting, this is a potentially dangerous situation, especially if the dog ever comes into contact with children whom the dog will be much more likely to bite. Dogs will also readily guard items of value from other pets in the household and this can lead to a fight which can be dangerous for people or other pets in the vicinity.

Preventing Resource Guarding

Resource guarding can be seen in puppies as young as 8 weeks old. Once a dog exhibits resource guarding, the behavior is manageable, but not curable.

“The easiest prevention for resource guarding is to identify what the dog is guarding and to prevent access to it,” says Marie. Giving a dog more of what it desires will not satisfy him; access will only fuel the obsession. Most importantly, if your dog is exhibiting any signs of resource guarding, Marie warns, “don’t react with aggression or confrontation.”

In cases of mild resource guarding, Marie offers several techniques for dog owners to try on their own.

- Slowly add food to his bowl as he eats
- Hand feed your dog
- Play with two toys that are similar to help make the dog understand that giving up an object is rewarded
- Ask your dog to bring you things in his mouth and trade for food or a toy is also a benign way to foster a good relationship with your dog. Avoid playing keep away where you have to forcefully take the item from your dog.

For more severe resource guarding, Marie strongly suggests that owners consult with a positive reinforcement training professional who will evaluate the dog in its environment and develop a plan for managing the dog’s behavior. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact us at 860-242-9999.