



Why It Happens

Resource guarding is a very **normal and natural** behavior for dogs. They are a social species, which means they must compete for resources. The problem is this behavior is very undesirable (and dangerous) to us humans, so we must come to a compromise with dogs on this behavior. This behavior is often misunderstood often as a sign of “dominance,” however, research shows that resource-holding potential is **not correlated with status**. Instead, members of a group tend to let different dogs control different resources, based on each dog’s willingness to protect the individual resources they hold valuable, and their likelihood at winning a battle over it. Dogs can guard any object, person, or place that they see as a valuable resource. People often get emotional when it comes to resource guarding, but at the end of the day, the dog is simply worried that you are going to take something away from him. Many times the dog has been conditioned to believe this because it has happened in the past.

Prevention

There is a myth that you should frequently take toys or food from your dog while he’s eating or playing. However, this is what often **causes** resource guarding behavior, as dogs learn that their precious resources will be snatched up for no reason while they’re enjoying them, so they begin to guard them from you and your unpredictable snatching.

Instead, you should practice frequently taking toys (begin with low value toys at first, and gradually move to higher value toys) from your dog by offering him a treat in **return** to get him to drop the toy, so that you can pick it up and then give the toy back. This teaches your dog that he doesn’t have to guard his precious resources from you. Teaching a solid “drop it” cue will also help reduce guarding behaviors and provide an alternative to ever having to snatch food or items away from your dog. **You should never disturb a dog who is eating.**

Management

Objects that dogs guard should be removed from their accessibility. If a dog guards toys, they should not be left in the dog’s reach, and the dog should only have them while under supervision (preferably in their safe space like a crate). If a dog guards food, food bowls should always be picked up after the dog is done eating (and the dog should always eat in their safe space). A baby gate can be put up in the kitchen to keep the dog away from potential dropped scraps (**many owners of resource guarders may leave baby gates in different areas around the house as well to prevent access to different resources**). It may be best to crate the dog during mealtimes. If a dog guards people, the dog should be muzzle trained and the muzzle should be used around new people. If the dog guards beds/couches, the dog should not be allowed on them (**do not push them off as this may make the guarding behavior worse**—try luring them off with a high value treat).

Ensuring dogs have enough exercise in the form of both mental and physical stimulation is important for any dog with behavior issues. Adding an extra outlet for physical and mental exercise (in the form of another walk or training session, interactive play time, enrichment toys, etc) will reduce anxiety or aggression in many cases. Also ensure that your dog is following a regular daily routine—knowing what to predict from their daily life can greatly reduce anxiety/aggression as well.

Improving your relationship with your dog through non-aversive positive reinforcement training may also reduce resource guarding behavior. “Leave it,” “stay,” and “touch” are all particularly useful for dogs who show resource guarding behavior. Teaching dogs “wait” for food/high value items can also be helpful in reducing guarding.

Training

In many cases, the guarding behavior has been unintentionally reinforced by owners, who tend to naturally move away from a growling dog. This teaches the dog that this behavior is appropriate because he achieved what he wanted (space). This does not mean a guarding dog should be approached. If the dog’s warnings are not heeded, then he will learn that warnings don’t work, and he will escalate to biting without giving warnings. There is a careful balance in the middle where the dog learns appropriate behavior.

If a dog is guarding an object, a higher value reward (such as fresh meat or cheese) should always be offered in exchange for the object. Reward the dog with the higher value treat by moving him away from the object he was guarding so that you can pick it up with the other hand while the dog is taking the treat. If the dog is reactive toward people approaching them when they have food or high value items, begin by simply tossing treats as you walk by while the dog has the object. This can be done from as far away as the other side of the room and should be done even if the dog is growling, snarling, or barking. You will not be positively reinforcing guarding because the behavior has been conditioned to a degree that the opportunity for rational teaching is gone. The only way to change such behavior is counter conditioning. In other words, changing how the dog feels about people being near his valued objects will change his behavior.

As you continue tossing treats to the dog when they have the item they’re guarding, you should notice they stop showing the guarding behavior. Now you can take a small step closer. As you repeat the exercise of walking by and tossing treats, gradually close the distance between you and the dog until you can get close enough to trade the object for a higher value treat (this can take days or weeks). Instead of being afraid that we will take his things away when we approach, he will learn that he gets yummy treats when we approach! If the dog ever shows signs of aggression, you’ve gone too far too fast. Stay still but not intimidating (stand with your side to the dog and don’t look at them), don’t move until the dog has relaxed, and then toss a treat. Take a step back and continue from the last step you had success on. After you’re able to approach and safely interact with the dog while they have a high value item, begin practicing with other people as well.

Follow the same basic process with food guarding. Begin far enough away that your dog isn't growling yet, and begin by talking to your dog in the tone that he enjoys. Toss treats toward him. Over many repetitions, gradually get closer to the dog as you toss treats until you are able to stand or even sit next to him while he eats and place treats into his food bowl, or even pick the bowl up to add treats and give it back. This process could take days or weeks, practicing at both mealtimes daily. Again, if the dog ever shows signs of aggression, you've gone too far too fast. Don't move until he has relaxed, and then toss a treat. Take a step back and continue from the last step you had success on.

If your dog guards furniture, make sure that the dog has solid and reliable "on" and "off" cues that tell him when he is and isn't allowed on furniture. If he ever guards his spot on the bed or couch, he is not allowed on that spot! To teach "on" or "up," pat the bed/couch and call your dog up. There is no need for a reward for this cue (if the dog likes to be on the couch or bed!) since being on the furniture itself is the reward. Then show the dog a treat and lure him down onto the ground and say "off," giving him the treat when all four feet touch the ground. Be sure to begin training this cue on furniture that your dog does not guard! You can also use the "touch" cue to get your dog off the furniture.

Resource Guarding Between Other Pets

If any of your dogs shows resource guarding behavior to any of your other pets, the management plan is the same as with people. Training is basically the same as well—follow the same protocol as above, but with the other pet(s) with you, so instead of you slowly desensitizing the dog to your approach, you will be slowly desensitizing him to the approach of the other pet(s) (which you will have on leash). Any time you catch the dog not guarding the food/object when the other pet(s) is within eyesight, reward the dog with high value treats and praise heavily.

Most people will recognize more overt signals of guarding/tension such as growling, snarling, or lunging. However, at this point, it may be too late to stop the aggression. Instead, watch each dog's body language closely for earlier, more subtle signs of tension and disagreement, so that you can redirect the dogs calmly and casually before the tension escalates any further.

- Staring/extended eye contact
- Whale eye (looking out of the side of their eyes)
- Stiffness/tension in any part of the body/face
- Tail stops wagging or lowers suddenly
- Ears going back
- Paw lifting

At the same time as redirecting signs of tension, always reward any "calming" signals (signals meant to communicate peace and reduce tension) directed toward each other in the presence of potential triggers. Common calming signals include:

- Yawning

- Shaking off (as when they're wet)
- Looking or walking away from the trigger
- Sniffing around the ground
- Sitting/lying down (especially with a big sigh)

If one or both of your dogs guards you from other pets, practice teaching each dog "stay" separately. Once they can both hold at least a 30 second stay, practice "stay" with both dogs in the same room, taking turns giving one attention while the other stays. It helps to have two people during this exercise to ensure the dog who isn't receiving attention stays, or to tether the dog who isn't receiving attention.

References

Landsberg, Hunthausen, Ackerman (2013). Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat, Third Edition.