

Food Guarding



Introduction

Guarding possessions from humans or other animals is normal behavior for dogs. Wild animals who successfully protect their valuable resources—such as food, mates and living areas—are more likely to survive in the wild than those who don't. However, we find the tendency to guard valued items undesirable in our domestic pets, especially when the behavior is directed toward people.

Resource guarding in dogs can range from relatively benign behavior, like running away with a coveted item or growling at an approaching person, to full-blown aggression, such as biting or chasing a person away. Some dogs only direct resource guarding toward certain people, often strangers. Other dogs guard their resources from all people. Dogs vary in what they consider valuable. Some dogs only guard chew bones or toys. Some guard stolen items, such as food wrappers from the trash can or socks. Many dogs guard food.

In many cases, food guarding doesn't need to be treated. Plenty of pet parents with food-guarding dogs simply take reasonable precautions to ensure everyone's safety. They leave their dogs alone while they're eating, or they might even feed their dogs in a separate room, in a crate or behind a barrier. They provide their dogs with adequate amounts of food so that their dogs feel less motivated to guard. They never attempt to take away stolen or scavenged food from their dogs.

However, if children live in a home with a resource-guarding dog, the situation becomes unacceptably risky. Children are more likely to get bitten because they're less able to recognize a dog's warning signals and more likely to behave recklessly around the dog. In some cases, the risk of living with a dog who guards resources is too high for adults, too. For example, some dogs guard food on tables and counters, leftover food on dishes in the dishwasher and food dropped on the floor. Because it's impossible to avoid these situations, it's impossible to prevent the guarding behavior.

An Ounce of Prevention

Young puppies are prone to guarding behavior because they often have to compete with their littermates for limited amounts of food. Breeders often feed puppies from one large communal pan, and the puppy who manages to eat the most will grow the quickest and become the strongest. If a breeder is not observant, this situation can deteriorate into one or two puppies monopolizing most of the food. A history of being rewarded for aggressive behavior can become firmly established in these puppies.

If you have a new puppy or adult dog who doesn't guard things, it's important to do some simple exercises to prevent the development of guarding behavior. As soon as you bring your new dog home, make sure you hand feed several meals. Sit with your dog and give him his kibble one bite at a time. During hand-fed meals, speak pleasantly to your dog and stroke him while you offer him food with your other hand. If he shows any discomfort or wariness, stop hand feeding him and see the exercises outlined below. If your dog seems calm and comfortable with hand feeding, switch to holding his bowl in your lap and allowing him to eat from the bowl. Continue to speak to him and stroke his head and body while he eats. After a few meals, place your dog's bowl on the floor and, as he eats his regular chow, periodically reach down to drop in a piece of something especially tasty, like a small bite of cheese, chicken or beef. If you do this intermittently for the first few months after you bring your dog home, he should remain relaxed and unthreatened by your presence while he eats.

Some Precautions

If you think your dog is likely to bite you, please do not attempt to resolve his resource guarding on your own. Doing so could place you in serious harm, especially if your dog has a history of biting or has attempted to bite in the past. Consult with a professional or veterinarian.

With some dogs, treatment for food guarding can be tricky. If you attempt the exercises below and your dog appears stressed and refuses to eat—but he still guards

his bowl—discontinue the exercises immediately and seek help from a behaviorist or qualified trainer. You'll also want to seek help from one of these professionals if you're able to do the exercises below for a while but hit a point at which your dog does not progress further.

Treatment Exercises for Food Guarding

The treatments used for food guarding are desensitization combined with counterconditioning. They're highly effective but fairly complex and detailed.

The exercises described below are done in stages. After doing the exercises in one stage, you can progress to the next stage if your dog is relaxed and shows no signs of aggression. Dog body language can be complex, so it's sometimes difficult to tell how a dog feels at any given moment. To determine what your dog looks like when he's relaxed, take note of what his body, ears, eyes and tail do when you know he's in a situation he finds pleasant. For example, notice what your dog looks like when you and he are relaxing together on the couch or taking a leisurely walk. Signs that a dog feels calm and content include a relaxed posture (muscles relaxed, not tensed), normal breathing or slight panting, eating at a normal pace, wagging and wiggling. Signs of aggression to watch for while you're doing exercises include standing stiffly over the bowl, gulping the food, tensing or freezing, growling, staring, snapping, snarling, biting or chasing people away. If you see any of these signs, stop immediately and contact a professional.

If you're unsure about your dog's reaction to the exercises, tether him to something sturdy. That way, if your dog moves toward you, he will be restrained by the leash.

Before you start any of the exercises below, cut a number of special treats into bite-sized pieces for your dog. You'll need to use something your dog absolutely loves and doesn't get to eat at other times, like small bits of chicken, beef, hot dogs or cheese. The idea is to convince your dog that it's wonderful when you approach him while he's eating because you might bring him something much better than what he's got in his bowl.

Stage One

- Stand a few feet away from your dog while he eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor. Do not move toward your dog.
- Say something like, "What have you got there?" in a conversational tone and, at the same time, toss a special treat toward the bowl. Continue to do this every few seconds until your dog finishes eating his kibble.

- Repeat this exercise each time you feed your dog until he eats in a relaxed way for 10 meals in a row. Then you can move on to Stage Two.

During your exercises, if your dog leaves the bowl and moves toward you to ask for more treats, just ignore him. Wait until he goes back to his bowl and starts eating again before tossing more tasty treats.

Stage Two

- While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, say “What have you got there?” in a conversational tone. At the same time, take one step toward him and toss a special treat toward the bowl. Then immediately step back. Repeat this sequence every few seconds until your dog has finished eating.
- Each day, take one step closer to your dog before tossing him the special treat. Continue at this stage until you come within two feet of the bowl. When your dog eats in a relaxed way for 10 meals in a row as you repeatedly approach and stand two feet away and give him a treat, you’re ready to move to the next stage.

Stage Three

- While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying “What have you got there?” in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog’s bowl and drop a special treat into it. Then immediately turn around and walk away.
- Repeat this sequence every few seconds until your dog has finished eating. When he eats in a relaxed way for 10 meals in a row, you’re ready for the next stage.

Stage Four

- While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying “What have you got there?” in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog, holding a special treat in your hand. Bend down slightly, holding the treat out just an inch or two in your dog’s direction. Encourage him to stop eating the food in the bowl to take the treat. After he eats the treat from your hand, immediately turn around and walk away. Repeat this sequence every few seconds until your dog has finished eating.
- Each day, bend down a little more when you offer your dog the special treat so that your hand moves an inch or two closer to his bowl. Stay at this stage until you can bend down and hold your hand with the treat right next to your dog’s bowl. When your dog eats relaxed for 10 meals in a row as you repeatedly approach to bend down and offer him a treat next to his bowl, you’re ready for the next stage.

Stage Five

- While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying “What have you got there?” in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog, bend down and touch his bowl with one hand while offering him a special treat with your other hand.
- Continue to do this every few seconds until your dog has finished the food in his bowl. When your dog eats relaxed for 10 meals in a row, you can move to the next stage.

Stage Six

- While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying “What have you got there?” in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog, bend and pick up his bowl with one hand. Raise it only six inches off the floor and drop a special treat in the bowl. Then immediately return the bowl to the floor so that your dog can eat from it.
- Continue to do this every few seconds until your dog has finished all the food in his bowl. As you repeat the sequence, raise the bowl slightly higher off the floor each time until you can lift it all the way up to your waist and stand upright.
- Repeat the sequence, but when you pick up your dog’s bowl, walk over to a table or counter with it. Then put a special treat into the bowl, walk back to your dog and return the bowl to the same place on the floor.

Stage Seven: Making It Work for Everyone

- The last stage is to have all adult family members go through stages one through six. Each person needs to start at the beginning and progress through the steps the same way, always making sure that your dog continues to look relaxed and comfortable during exercises. Don’t assume that because your dog is okay with one person approaching his bowl, he’ll automatically be comfortable with another person doing the same thing. He has to learn that the rules work the same way with everyone.
- The entire treatment program above is gradual enough to help your dog relax and anticipate the special treats rather than feel threatened and become aggressive when people approach him while he’s eating. Through the exercises, your dog will learn that people approaching his food bowl bring even tastier food—they’re not coming to take his food away from him.

Treatment Troubleshooting and Tips

- If you can’t feed your dog kibble for some reason, just make sure that the treats you offer by hand during exercises are more desirable to your dog than the food in his bowl.
- If you can feed your dog kibble but prefer he eat something else instead—such as a raw diet, homemade food or canned food—do all the exercises with kibble first but then go through the steps again using the more exciting food in your dog’s

bowl. Again, just make sure what you offer by hand during exercises is still better than what your dog already has in his bowl.

- If your dog eats so quickly that you have few opportunities to offer better food during treatment exercises, buy a commercially available dish designed to slow down his eating.

Managing Your Dog's Behavior

Apart from your treatment sessions, you need to manage your dog's behavior carefully to avoid aggressive encounters. Do not allow others to go near your dog while he's eating. If he guards food from children in the family, DO NOT attempt these exercises with any child under 18 years of age. Instead, seek help from a professional.

If your dog guards food from visitors to your home, it might be easier to manage his behavior than resolve it. If your dog and guests are in the same room, just remove all food items from the area. Alternatively, you can keep your dog confined in a separate area of your home while guests visit. Be aware that dogs sometimes guard food intended for people, even if the food is situated on a table or countertop. If food is going to be present when guests visit, you'll want to confine your dog to ensure everyone's safety.

What NOT to Do

- Do not punish or intimidate your dog when he guards food. Remember that when a person approaches a food-guarding dog, the dog will react as though the person intends to take the food away. This makes sense because dogs naturally compete for food. Some people insist that "dominating" your dog and showing that you're stronger and able to take away his food will make him stop guarding it. On the contrary, doing so is dangerous and unnecessary. It can sometimes cause resource guarding to get worse, and it can damage your relationship with your dog. It's easier and safer to simply change the way your dog feels about people approaching him when he has food through desensitization and counterconditioning.

Information taken from ASPCA website