

RESOURCE GUARDING

WHAT IS RESOURCE GUARDING, AND WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Resource guarding, the instinct to hoard and protect valued possessions, is a highly adaptive canine trait. Our dogs' ancestors were programmed to guard essential resources, like food, in order to survive. Pack members that didn't prevent other animals from snatching their dinners didn't last very long in the wild.

The deeply-rooted instinct to guard things of value still persists in many domestic dogs—even when they live in cushy human homes with resources galore. Even if you shower your Shih-Tzu with all the tasty kibble she can eat, her ancestors' genetic programming may tell her to protect her dinner, toys and favorite chewies from any possible "threat" (i.e., you). Don't take it personally. It's just part of who she is and where she and her domestic canine buddies came from.

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY DOG GUARDS RESOURCES?

Dogs guard all kinds of things they consider important, including food, treats, toys, bones, favorite people, and favorite places to rest or hang out. Some dogs only guard single, specific items. Others guard a range of resources.

Signs of resource guarding include:

- avoidance or hiding under furniture with valued object
- accelerated eating or chewing
- slowed eating—or suddenly stopping eating
- freezing
- glassy or "hard" eyes and staring
- growling
- lip lifting (showing teeth)
- snapping
- biting

Some dogs freeze, stare and growl dramatically before resorting to snapping and biting to fend off what they perceive as a threat to their possessions. Other dogs will give almost imperceptible warnings—or no warnings at all—before biting.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY DOG'S RESOURCE GUARDING?

Luckily, resource guarding doesn't have to destroy your relationship with your dog. But if your dog has shown signs of resource guarding, you do need to be aware of the issue and manage it diligently. You can also take measures to modify the behavior.

Management

In order to manage a resource guarding problem, avoid putting your dog in situations that make her feel threatened and elicit guarding behavior. If your dog guards her dinner, feed her in a room by herself and don't take away her bowl until she's finished eating and left the bowl. If your dog only guards pig ears, give her

something else to chew instead. If your dog guards all chew toys, put her in her crate before giving her a chewie and don't let her out until she's finished it.

Always be aware that if your dog has guarded resources in the past, she may guard any valued resource in the future, especially if the resource is novel and exciting. (Keep in mind that "exciting" is in the eye of the beholder. Your dog may find a used Kleenex on the sidewalk way more exciting than, say, the rawhide bone you gave her last week.)

If your dog gains possession of something that she can't have—like your Prada heels or a half-eaten chicken wing in the park—be prepared to trade the item for something else that's extra-tasty, like a bite of hotdog or last-night's leftovers. Toss the yummy trade item at least 4 feet away from your dog, so that she must abandon whatever you want to take away from her in order to retrieve your tossed goodie.

Behavior Modification

"Correcting" or disciplining your dog for guarding resources is extremely dangerous and will actually worsen the problem. You can, however, modify resource guarding behavior with specific training protocols. Proper treatment of the problem involves a desensitization and counterconditioning program to teach your dog that you *aren't* a threat to her resources.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

An experienced professional dog trainer can guide you through a well-planned training program to modify your dog's resource guarding behavior. Call our **Behavior Helpline** if you'd like a referral to a local trainer who can help, or if you need additional advice in the form of a phone call or a private consultation at the Richmond SPCA: **804-643-SPCA**.