

# Resource guarding and your dog, for better or for worse

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Resource guarding is a natural part of your dog's emotional makeup. Our expectations are unrealistic if we think we'll never see it to some degree. You can compare it to expecting that a human should never, in their lives, ever lose their temper. Like all animals, dogs will behave aggressively when feeling threatened and in order to defend resources.

## **Resource guarding most often happens around food items but dogs will also guard:**

- toys or objects perceived as play objects
- areas they like to sleep such as a bed or a couch
- their owner, who mistakenly feels their dog is protecting them when in fact, their dog is actually commodifying them (i.e. this human's my dispenser of food and affection! Back off!) This one's more common in a multi-pet home where there is only one lap to enjoy but can manifest out there on walks as well.

## **I want it because you want it**

Often a dog will place a high value on an object only because he sees you want it back so urgently. Rather than allowing access to valuable objects, put them away until the dog is older so you don't get into an antagonistic routine of constantly pulling things from his mouth. This behaviour only builds a relationship of resentment and mistrust, which in turn, creates trigger-stacking and aggression.

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When my Jack Russell Terrier was a puppy I quickly discovered that she was far craftier, and faster than I, with unending endurance for bouncing just out of reach when she'd stolen something. Among many other objects, she was a master at grabbing socks and I was driving myself crazy trying to save them all from utter destruction. When I stopped chasing her for them, she started bringing them to me to entice me to play. Instead of grabbing for them, I would offer a Cheerio but only once she dropped the sock. Very quickly she started bringing me all sorts of things for a trade, including the socks (intact and no longer shredded). After that I would take the initiative by asking her to "*find the sock*", and that was the start of a very happy and healthy "*find and retrieve*" game we still share today. This is called putting a behaviour on cue and you can do this with all kinds of less than desirable behaviours, like reorienting your dog to come to you rather than leaving him barking and jumping at the front door when the doorbell rings. Don't fight it, shape it into something fun that's rewarding for both of you.

### **Start some object exchange exercises so you'll be prepared for the next time he takes your new shoe or a bottle of vitamins you've accidentally dropped on the floor**

- 1) Give the puppy an object he'll only mildly be interested in
- 2) Hold out your hand and say "*give*"
- 3) Take the object away, gently, without pulling
- 4) Provide a nice treat in exchange
- 5) Give the object back and repeat several times until he's dropping the object on his own
- 6) Move gradually up to objects he might value more highly, perhaps something like your new shoe that he's found on his own.

I would practice these exercises throughout his puppyhood to really engrain the cue.

### **Food bowl exercises for puppies**

Food bowl desensitization is just as important as the proper handling of toys and objects, if not more so. It should start as soon as you bring your puppy home and commence feeding.

Without a pro-active strategy in getting a puppy comfortable with mealtime company (yours) while eating, most dogs will develop resource guarding behaviours such as:

- a hard stare
- freezing
- gobbling food faster
- growling
- snarling

- snapping
- possibly a bite

## When feeding puppies

- 1) Sit beside him and hang around while he eats
- 2) Put his bowl on the floor but keep your hand on it until it's half consumed. Start a verbal cue like *"want more?"*, then pick the bowl up, add an additional yummy treat and give the bowl back to him.
- 3) The whole household should perform these exercises so the puppy learns to expect the same behaviour from all family members. Dog's are not good generalizers. They have to learn what to expect from each person.

## Adult dogs new to your home

Object exchange exercises can and should be implemented with new adult companions, the process is the same as with puppies. Food bowl exercises are even more important and take a bit more care.

Dogs are usually more trusting of one person when it comes to their food bowls. That trust does not usually extend to other people not involved in their feeding routines which is why it's important that everyone (young children exempted) participates in the feeding protocols.

The time to set ground rules is as soon as your new companion joins your household before any negative patterns develop. However, they can be implemented with existing canine family members, with a bit more care.

Food bowl strategy is similar to how we teach puppies but, of course, there is more risk with a grown dog, especially one who is new to your home. You might want to start off with a protective glove, to first determine the dog's tolerance levels.

When placing the bowl on the floor, do not let go. Sit down as you'll be there while he finishes,

- hand on the bowl, to the dog, means *"this food is my owners and she's sharing"*
- hand off the bowl, to the dog, means *"this food is now mine"*
- hand returning to the bowl, to the dog, now means, *"my owner is attempting to steal what's mine and I'm protecting my property"*
- When the dog has finished, wait for him to move off even if the bowl is empty. In his mind, it's his until he walks away.

*Once he seems comfortable with your presence and routine (likely over a period of weeks):*

1) Sit beside him and hang around while he eats

2) Put his bowl on the floor but keep your hand on it until it's half consumed. Start a verbal cue like "*want more?*", then pick the bowl up, add an additional yummy treat and give the bowl back to him.

3) The whole household (small children exempted until they are older) should do this so the dog learns to expect the same behaviour from all family members. Dog's are not good generalizers so they have to learn what to expect from each person.

**THE DOG BLOG** is a great resource for tips on training and canine well being. Got questions or a topic in mind? Let me know via the comments box. I would love to hear from you.

#### **Additional Resources:**

1) *Culture Clash, A revolutionary new way of understanding the relationship between humans and domestic dogs*, by Jean Donaldson

2) *Mine! A Practical Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs*, by Jean Donaldson

Banner photo courtesy of skeeze from Pixabay



## Comments



**Angela MacDonald** 12 November, 2020

My dog is fairly tolerant when it comes to his toys and food, however, he seems to feel the need to guard the front door when visitors attempt to exit the house.

They are allowed to enter but not allowed to leave. Any thoughts?



**Faith Schofield** 22 November, 2020

I attended beginner and intermediate classes with my very high energy excitable miniature poodle. He was a nuisance crying through the classes at the beginning

and I was very frustrated but Patricia was very patient with us both. She is very knowledgeable about dogs and behavior problems and is always calm and teaches how to get the desired behavior through her gentle training techniques. She has transformed my out of control puppy into a much more focused and very smart and obedient dog.

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