From the editors of

The Whole Dog Journal

Resource Guarding

Is Your Dog On Guard, Eliminating Unwanted Canine Behaviors

How to reduce, eliminate, or better yet, prevent resource-guarding.

By Lisa Rodier

Ever had a dog who won't give you his bone or chew toy if you try to take it from him? Or one who gets uncomfortable or growls if you get close to him when he's eating his dog food? Or snaps at you if he's on the sofa and you want him off? Or lifts his lip in a snarl if your friend tries to get close to you?

Answer yes to any of the above, and you've successfully diagnosed your dog as having a guarding issue. The catch-all, technical term is "resource-guarding," and can include guarding of dog food bowls (or food), places (dog crate, dog bed, sofa, etc.), items (rawhide, bones, balls, tissues, etc.) and less commonly, people.

Many shelters and trainers use a tool called an "Assess-A-Hand," a fake hand on a stick, to test dogs for resource-guarding. This dog is clearly a food-guarder.

Resource-guarding simply means that a dog gets uncomfortable when we (or other humans) are around him when he has "his stuff." He's nervous that we're going to take it away, so he tries to warn us off in a variety of ways, ranging from simply consuming his food faster, to an all-out bite.

Although canine resource-guarding appears to be more prevalent in certain breeds or classes of dogs, it can appear in literally any dog, including that sweet Papillion that lives down the street, or the goofy Golden Retriever who greets you happily on your morning walks.

Many shelters and trainers use a tool called an "assess-a-hand," a fake hand on a stick, to test dogs for resource-guarding. This dog is clearly a food-guarder.

It's important to recognize, identify, modify, or at least manage this behavior because a dog who is repeatedly pushed or punished in these situations is highly likely to eventually bite. Sure, it might be you that he bites, but it could also be your child, your neighbor's child, your boss, or your grandmother. Children are most apt to be at risk for a number of reasons. They tend to disregard warnings to "leave the dog alone" when he's eating or has a toy; they frequently fail to notice the dog's warning signs (stiffening, growling); and they are closer to the ground, so if the dog decides to bite, most likely the child's face will bear the brunt of the attack.

What you can do . . .

Closely observe your dog; what is he telling you with his body language and voice?

Set up your resource-guarding dog for success by managing his environment and preventing access to his most-guarded items. Keep his stress level low and prevent him from practicing undesirable behaviors.

Begin a behavior modification program, or seek help from a qualified, positive trainer.

Nature or nurture?

Resource-guarding "is a perfectly normal survival skill that allows smaller, weaker, and lower-status dogs to keep possession of a highly valued object even when that object is the target of a larger and stronger dog's desire," says Pat Miller, a trainer, Certified Dog Behavior Consultant, and Whole Dog Journal Training Editor. In her book, The Power of Positive Dog Training, Miller notes that, "Natural behavior or not, resource-guarding is a serious problem when it results in open aggression, especially toward humans."

In the wild, "a group-hunting carnivore would have reproductive advantage over one who gladly relinquishes. It's a good trait, like a well-developed immune system or legs that can run fast," says canine behavior expert Jean Donaldson, in her highly educational book, Mine! (devoted solely to the topic of resource-guarding). Of course, she adds, "In a domestic environment, it is undesired."

Sarah Kalnajs, trainer and Certified Dog Behavior Consultant, describes resource-guarding as having both nature (genetic) and nurture (upbringing) components. A dog might be genetically inclined to guard, but depending how much he is allowed to practice the behavior throughout his life also contributes to the severity of the problem.

Resource-guarding from other dogs is a much more "acceptable" or natural behavior in terms of a dog's ability to cohabitate with humans. It can certainly lead to big problems, and should not be dismissed, but for the time being, our discussion will focus on guarding from humans. Note: A dog who guards from other dogs will not necessarily resource-guard from humans.

What's your type?

"Food-guarding" seems to be the most common kind of canine guarding behavior, and is present if the dog "threatens" or bites when:

- Approached while eating from his bowl
- The owner tries to take back a food item the dog has grabbed
- Approached after he finds some kind of food item in the gutter or on the street

"Some dogs may be compulsive, guarding all food items and even an empty dish," says Donaldson, but she also notes, "The majority will guard only when actually in possession of sufficiently motivating food." The fact that a dog does not guard a particular food does not rule him out as a guarder. It just might not be worthy enough to him as, say, a chicken wing. The only way to determine whether a dog will guard a particular highly motivating food item is to test whether you can readily take that item when the dog has it.

With "object-guarding," the extent of guarding is dependent upon the value of the object to the dog. Items can include, but are certainly not limited to, bones, rawhides, pig ears, favorite toys/balls, laundry items, tissues, wrappers and other garbage, sticks, and/or any "forbidden" objects the dog happens to pick up – which are made more valuable by extreme owner reaction, such as chasing the dog around the room to get the item back, or screeching at the dog to give the item up.

While some trainers classify bones, rawhides, pig ears, and edible garbage as "objects," Pat Miller classifies them as food as the dog's intent is to eat them; therefore, she classifies the dog's behavior as food-guarding.

As with food-guarding, the dog may show signs of guarding simply when a person is in the vicinity, as the person approaches, and/or if the person tries to take the object from him. It is very common that a dog won't want something unless you want it. "Location-guarding" is also common in modern, dog-loving households. This would describe the following:

- A dog who does not allow owner or spouse into the bedroom or on the bed once the dog is on the bed
- A dog who is grumpy if jostled while on furniture, or when someone tries to move him

- A dog who threatens passersby while he's in his crate, car, or favorite rest spot

The severity of resource-guarding depends upon the value of the item, and who is approaching. In the case of location-guarding, the dog might allow "the wife" on the bed, but not her husband.

"Owner-guarding" seems to occur fairly frequently when other dogs are present.

Occasionally, however, the dog will guard his person if the dog is on leash with the person, or near her. Some people interpret this as "protectiveness."

Pat Miller differentiates these behaviors. "A good 'protection' dog recognizes a legitimate threat to his person and acts to deter the threat, or waits for instructions from the human to act. A dog who is 'guarding' his person – in the sense of resource-guarding – covets his owner as a possession that he's not willing to share with other dogs, or sometimes other humans. He sees the approaching dog/person as a threat to his enjoyment of his resource, rather than a physical threat to the person."

Owner-guarding can also become somewhat muddied if the owner has in his possession some resource – food or a bone, for example – that is valuable to the dog. He may react if his human carries treats or a bait bag. In this case, what, really, is the dog guarding: item or owner?

The contrast between this Chihuahua's diminutive size and his car-guarding ferocity amuses passers-by, who sometimes tease him – which aggravates the problem.

Trainer Virginia Broitman notes that many dogs who guard their owners are actually very insecure, and might feel empowered to act out because their humans are there. Or, the dog is on leash and cannot escape, so he resorts to an impressive display to keep the stranger away. Were he without his handler, or not on leash, we might see a different reaction.

Stay positive

You've shouted "No!" You've stomped your foot. You've used a physical correction. But your dog still freezes and growls when you get near him when he's eating or when he has his "stuff." What can you do?

First, you need to understand that shouting, stomping, and using physical corrections on the dog will only make matters worse.

I recently saw video footage of a trainer working with a large, young dog who had a history of guarding his food bowl. Over time, the owners had tried a variety of approaches: yelling at the dog, leaning over him while he ate and yelling, hand feeding, and petting the dog while he ate.

Unfortunately, the owner reported that the dog had become reactive to the owner when the owner was at a greater and greater distance from the guarded food. And when the owner tried "dominance" — in which he stood over the dog while the dog ate and "made" him do things for his food, then physically reprimanded the dog for being aggressive – the owner got bitten.

While the footage was stellar – the camera caught all of the dog's warnings superbly – the method that the trainer recommended for dealing with the problem was not. Instead of using behavior modification, which has the potential to make the dog safe around anyone, the trainer elected to use force and physical corrections using a choke chain to "show the dog that the people were in charge."

How Bad Is It?

During resource-guarding, dogs exhibit components of ritualized aggression. That is, they have a fairly explicit hierarchy of warnings – accelerated eating, cessation of eating or "freezing up," glassy/hard eyes, growling, lip lifting, snapping, biting – that they'll run through to get a competitor (YOU!) to back away from what they have. They're nervous that you're there and don't want to share.

Trainers and behaviorists take these warnings and apply a rating scale, ranging from reactions that pose no risk to humans to those that are extremely serious. These descriptions, below, are written primarily with food- or item-guarding in mind, but the same sort of warnings and escalation can be seen with place- or person-guarding. This information is compiled from Jean Donaldson, Pat Miller, and Sarah Kalnajs, describing a dog's reaction when a person approaches.

LEVEL 1: DON'T WORRY, I'M HAPPY!

- Relaxed and happy and wants attention, and does not perceive you as a threat.
- Stops eating or engaging with the resource and approaches you.

LEVEL 2: I SEE YOU

- Looks at you, wags his tail, but keeps eating.
- Still fairly relaxed with you around.
- If given an item, will lie down with it where he is.

LEVEL 3: I <u>SAID</u>, I KNOW YOU'RE THERE

- Slight tensing of body as you approach.
- Speed of tail wag and tension in body increases as you approach; you're starting to make him nervous!

LEVEL 4: GRANITE RABBIT

- Becomes still or freezes, often almost imperceptibly.
- If the dog was chewing, he stops chewing; if the dog was eating, he stops eating, but does not abandon the resource.
- Glassy-eyed stare accompanies a cessation of activity. The stare is rarely aimed at the approaching threat; many owners report a spaced-out, detached-looking expression. This can be an extremely subtle sign that many people miss.

LEVEL 5: I <u>HAVE</u> TO FINISH THIS BEFORE YOU TAKE IT

- Discomfort with your proximity increases and behavior escalates.
- If the dog was eating, he will eat faster, often "punching" at the food with his muzzle.
- If chewing, he chews faster and more intensely.
- Pushes face into bowl, his body tense, and/or tail tucked, with an exaggerated guarding posture (rear end up high, front end low, covering resource in a stiff and still manner).
- Freezes, glares, shows "whale eye" (head slightly turned away but eyes turning toward his focus so that whites show), or lip lift.

LEVEL 6: I'M WARNING YOU, DON'T TAKE IT!

- A low rumbling growl might be presented on its own, or in combination with other threats. It may or may not be protracted. Can be very quiet!
- Might carry the item under a chair, bed, or to his crate, then growl as you approach.
- Might try to push food bowl away from you.

LEVEL 7: THIS IS GONNA GET UGLY

- Snarl, exposing teeth by vertically retracting lips. This may occur before, after or in conjunction with other threats (i.e., growl and snarl, together).

LEVEL 8: CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

- Aggressive tooth display, and disengages from the food bowl or resource and snaps.
- Little or no contact, no punctures, but dog is telling you he is not willing to share with you. (Note: Donaldson describes a snap as "an air bite; dog deliberately misses." She reports that people often say that the dog tried to bite them, but they were able to move away quickly enough. Donaldson says, "This is unlikely, as a geriatric, couch-potato dog has a reaction time better than an Olympic athlete. When dogs intend to bite, they bite. When they intend to snap, they snap.")

LEVEL 9: I DON'T KNOW HOW ELSE TO TELL YOU

- Dog bites without breaking skin (has good bite inhibition).

LEVEL 10: DANGER!

- Dog bites; contact is quick, hard, and most likely will break skin.
- Typically bites multiple times, and might consist of punctures moving up the person's arm or face.

This is a rough guide to determine the seriousness of the issue. Some dogs haven't read the rule book, and might not move neatly through the hierarchy, leaping, for example, from a growl directly to a bite. A dog can move through this hierarchy quickly – in seconds – and might exhibit signs so subtle that we miss them completely.

Nevertheless, trainers often hear the cry, "He bit without warning!" More often than not, there was a warning, somewhere, sometime – we just missed it.

The trainer advised the couple to approach the bowl with the dog on leash and physically correct the dog for lunging toward the bowl or showing any signs of aggression (guarding), then "make" the dog sit about a foot away from the food. Once the dog was "calm," he was allowed to eat, remaining on leash with the owner. If the dog showed any aggression, the handler was to physically correct the dog and yank him away from the food bowl, wait for the dog to "calm down," then start again.

There are several problems with this approach. First, the couple hoped to one day have children, and this "method" taught the dog nothing about interacting with someone who didn't have a leash and the strength to make a physical correction. In addition, the trainer repeatedly triggered a reaction from the dog. Behavior experts agree that, in contrast to the approach used in the video, successful behavior modification works at a sub-threshold level, at a low-enough level of intensity to prevent the dog from reacting. Also, the trainer also did nothing to address the dog's emotional state (nervous, insecure, and stressed) and instead intensified it; what was defined as "calm" was anything but.

It's possible to suppress guarding behavior using force, says Pat Miller. "However, you haven't changed the dog's emotional response to a threat to his resource, just his physical response. It's quite possible that the guarding behavior will return if and when he feels too threatened, or is approached by someone that he doesn't perceive as capable of overpowering his desire for his resource.

"Any time you use force, you risk escalating the level of violence rather than modifying the behavior. You may not know until you've done significant behavioral damage that your dog is one who escalates, rather than shuts down, in the presence of violence."

Here's another dire scenario: If your dog growls at you over his food bowl and you punish or challenge him in some way, it might very well occur to him that his growl wasn't sufficient to warn you off. He may resort to the next warning level – a snarl, snap, or worse – in an effort to more effectively protect his food.

Behavior modification: Get to the problem's root

Experts agree that the best route to take in dealing with resource-guarding is to use a combination of management and behavior modification.

It Has Nothing to Do With Dominance!

Remember, resource-guarding is a *normal* canine behavior – and a highly adaptive trait in a natural environment. "If dogs had to fend for themselves tomorrow, guarders would have the survival and reproductive edge over non-guarders," says Donaldson. This has nothing whatsoever to do with a "dominant" or "pushy" personality in the dog.

As proof of this point, be aware that many dogs respond well to desensitization and counter-conditioning, and either stop guarding or reduce their guarding behaviors. If the dog stops guarding, does that mean we have made him less dominant by using these techniques? Donaldson notes that many dogs who guard have other problems such as submissive urination, shyness, or lack of confidence, which all are "diametrically opposed to the concept that the dog is overly assertive."

The fact is, many "aggressive" canine behaviors are triggered by fear or anxiety ("She's gonna take away my bowl!"), both of which cause an increase in adrenaline and stress hormones. Punishing your dog for resource-guarding can cause him to stop giving warnings altogether, or strengthen the behavior. His underlying emotion ("I wish she would stay away from my bed!") remains. Instead of growling, he'll just bite without warning.

Anxiety and insecurity, not aggression or dominance, lies at the root of most resource-guarding problems.

Essentially, "management" entails intervening in (or anticipating and preventing) a situation so that the dog cannot repeat inappropriate behavior. For example, we keep food and toys picked up around a resource-guarder so that he cannot engage in guarding. Management does not necessarily or teach the dog anything; he simply has less opportunity to practice an undesirable behavior.

The most important tools in the behavior-modification toolbox, though, are systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning.

Desensitization involves exposing the dog to whatever it is that previously evoked his fear or anxiety, but at a distance and intensity that does not produce a response.

Counter-conditioning is a process in which we replace a dog's involuntary, undesirable reaction (such as fear) with a more desirable response – one that is incompatible with the undesirable old response (such as the eager anticipation of a tasty treat). We create a positive emotional response by associating an event (your approach) with something good (a reward). This methodology has been proven to work, and is relatively easy and pleasant for both human and dog.

With counter-conditioning, you don't exert your "control" over the dog in any way, but instead, transform your presence around the dog's possessions into a signal that even better things are coming. One event becomes a reliable predictor of another event, and the subject develops an anticipatory response to the first event. By pairing good things (extra scrumptious treats) with the formerly bad thing (your approach or presence near whatever he is guarding), your proximity starts to become a better thing – a predictor of what is to come (treats!).

The goal is to transform a food-guarder who becomes tense or upset when a person approaches him while he's eating into a dog who is happy to be approached while eating, as this reliably predicts the delivery of even more food or treats.

Donaldson stresses the need to work at a low threshold; if at any point the dog shows the original reaction, you have gone super-threshold, and it is necessary to back up and start at a point where the dog does not react. "No good comes of rehearsing the dog's old, growly behavior by replicating super-threshold versions of the trigger. In fact, it can make the dog worse."

Donaldson also makes it clear that when working with a guarder, we need to be sure that the first event (the "threat" to the resource) must come before the delivery of the counter-conditioning treat. For example, in a food bowl exercise, "the approach, bowl touch, or bowl removal must precede the addition of bonuses to the dish." This means that we do not, for example, show a dog the bait in hopes of preventing a guarding reaction. Doing so will not condition the appropriate emotional response.

Doing the work

Ideally, you start with a young pup who doesn't guard and teach him early on that your presence predicts good stuff, says Miller. "You do this by offering to trade something wonderful for whatever he already has – such as a toy of moderate value, to start with – working your way up to really high-value items. I teach a 'Give' cue by saying 'Give,' then offering a high value treat

Paws sometimes guards rope toys and Frisbees. Berkeley, California, trainer Sandi Thompson "trades" a low-value toy that Paws has dropped in favor of a high-value treat.

in exchange for his object. Repeat until he will happily give up any object when you ask him to 'Give.' "

Trainers use different protocols; there is always more than one way to approach an exercise. The protocol you use should be tailored to your dog, depending on the seriousness of his guarding behavior. "Progress gradually to the next step, only when your dog is totally relaxed at the current step," says trainer Virginia Broitman.

"Some dogs will move quickly through the steps, while others may need weeks of work. Don't rush! If at any point you are concerned for your safety or unclear on any step, discontinue the exercises and consult an experienced trainer/behavior counselor for personalized assistance."

One example of a protocol for a dog who already guards objects begins with a good look at all the items in the dog's environment and ranking them according to their value to the dog. For instance, a ball may be a low-value item, while a rawhide may be extremely high-value. A list might look like this:

- Stuffed squeaky toys
- Latex squeaky toys
- Rubbery flying disks
- Pig's ears
- Rawhide chews
- Rope toys
- Balls
- Socks
- Newspapers and magazines

Once the items have been ranked, training begins with the items that the dog doesn't especially care about and does not want. Initially, higher value items must not be available to the dog, because we want to prevent him from "practicing" his guarding behavior.

A session begins with the trainer presenting a low-value item to the dog and telling him to "Take it!" Almost immediately, the trainer gives a cue for "Drop it!" and gives the dog an extremely delicious treat." The idea is that the dog is more than happy to "drop" the low-value item in favor of the treat. This exercise would be repeated dozens of times over a number of sessions.

Note: If the trainer is concerned that the dog may act aggressively in order to take the higher-value treat, she should have the dog on a tether, position herself just out of reach, and toss the treats in such a way to most safely reach for the low-value item. Again, in the case of a dog whose guarding behavior rates higher than a four on the scale found on page 5, the services of a qualified, positive canine behavior professional are recommended.

Only when the dog is comfortable with the first step would the protocol change, first by giving the dog the item and walking away, giving him a minute to enjoy the low-value item, and then returning to trade. As long as the dog continues to respond well to these exercises, you would work up to the more valuable items higher on your dog's list. Training would occur in a variety of locations, and from then on, throughout the dog's life, "spot checks" would be instituted to be sure that the dog retained what he learned.

Note: This example is a summary provided only to give the reader an idea as to what is involved in rehabilitating a guarder. If you

The author's Bouvier, Axel, used to guard tennis balls. He learned to give them up through "give" and "trade" cues, starting with low-value items.

have a guarder, you will need to follow a more detailed, structured protocol, and may require the assistance of a qualified behavior professional. See "Finding the Right Trainer," below.

If your household includes children, you will need to take special precautions. Initially, only the adults should work with a dog who guards; kids should be a part of the guarding-rehabilitation program only after the adults have worked extensively with the dog, and only under direct supervision of an adult. Never assume that once your dog stops guarding with you, that he'll stop guarding his items from the kids.

Similarly, you should never assume that once your dog no longer guards his cherished items from you or your family, he will no longer guard them from other people. Plan, manage, and supervise your dog's interactions carefully, to prevent any possible harm to other people.

For location-guarding, follow a similar protocol. Start by using a place the dog does not guard and reward him for coming away from/off the place willingly. Donaldson likes to use target training as part of this protocol.

Manage in the mean time

Guarding behavior can be a daunting challenge to overcome, especially if it has progressed significantly. In this case, you must find an experienced trainer/behaviorist with whom to work. Until you are able to get help, management is a valid alternative. This involves avoiding the problem or trigger through environmental control. For example, if your dog guards pig ears, remove them from your home and do not allow him access to them. Keep the bedroom door closed to a bed-guarder.

If there is a "management failure," and the dog gets on the bed, you can either ignore the dog and wait for him to come off the bed on his own, or, more proactively, redirect him to an alternative activity, such as calling the dog to the kitchen for a cookie or inviting him out for a brief walk.

Finding the Right Trainer

If you have a resource-guarder, you should find a positive trainer with whom to work.

When interviewing prospective trainers, trainer Ali Brown recommends avoiding any "who don't have a working knowledge of operant conditioning, classical conditioning, positive reinforcement, and negative punishment. Stick with trainers who talk about building working relationships, use a clicker, and avoid choke chains, prong collars, shock collars, shaker cans, spray bottles, or throw chains. The trainer you select should be comfortable with working with resource-guarding; not all trainers are."

Pat Miller suggests, "To start, look at the listings on websites such as the APDT (Association of Pet Dog Trainers, apdt.com), IAABC (International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants, iaabc.com), and the CCPDT (Certification Council for Pet Dog Trainers, ccpdt.com). While not all trainers listed use appropriate non-force methods, it's a good place to start looking. I have a trainer referral list on my website (peaceablepaws.com), and those trainers are all positive (by my definitions). Ask the trainers exactly what tools and methods they use. Avoid any trainers who use methods designed to cause pain or use intimidation."

Another good resource for well-educated trainers is the San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers, founded by Jean Donaldson, which maintains a list of trainers taught by Donaldson (see sfspca.org/academy/index.shtml). Most graduates of this program are highly qualified to deal with resource-guarding.

The prognosis for a resource-guarder, especially an older dog, depends on a number of factors, including owner compliance, the presence of protracted warning signals (stares, growls, snarls, and snaps), and the degree of the dog's bite inhibition (ability to control the strength of his bite).

Depending on the level of guarding, rehabilitation can take weeks to months. Trainer Ali Brown says this can depend on many factors, including your consistency; how well you manage the situation; whether you work with a professional, positive trainer; whether you have worked with a problem like this before; how well everyone else in the family manages and trains the dog; whether the dog is under other stressors that can be diminished; and whether there are any medical problems that might contribute to the problem.

"Any behavioral problem has many variables to it," says Brown. "We can't control them all, but we can try to control as many as possible to hedge our bets that we'll see quick progress."

If your food-guarder ever manages to pick up something that's dangerous (such as a bar of dark chocolate) or valuable to you (like your prescription glasses), Donaldson advises trying a quick, calm, "bait and switch." Bribe or distract the dog with anything you can think of. "Although bribery is totally ineffective for fostering actual behavior change, when you're in a jam, anything goes," she says. But remember, repeated management failures teach the dog nothing.

Rehabilitation of a resource-guarder takes time and requires patience. But the payoff in the end – for you, your dog, and your friends and family – is well worth the effort.

Unwanted Dog Food Guarding Behavior

Five things to do when your dog guards a toy, bone, treat, or bed.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC

Resource guarding may be a natural, normal dog behavior, but it's alarming when your own dog growls – or worse, snaps – at you over his resource. Resist your first impulse to snap back at your dog. Instead, do this:

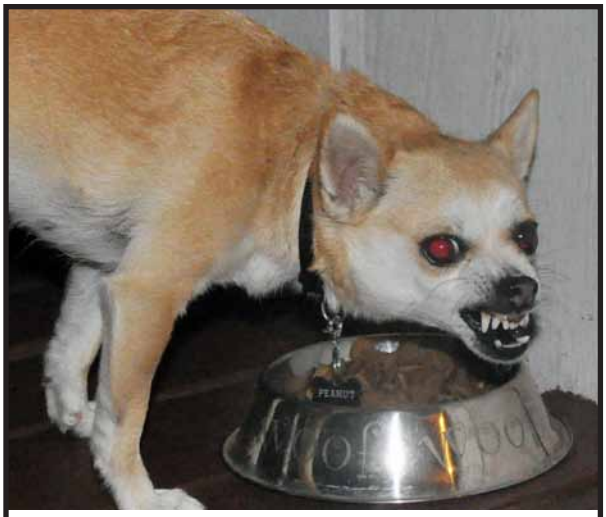
1) Stop. Whatever you did that caused your dog to growl, stop doing it. Immediately. If you were walking toward him, stand still. If you were reaching toward him, stop reaching. If you were trying to take the toy or bone away from him, stop trying.

2) Analyze. Your next action depends on your lightning-fast analysis of the situation. If your dog is about to bite you, retreat. Quickly. If you're confident he won't escalate, stay still. If you aren't sure, retreat. Err on the side of caution. Complete your analysis by identifying what resource he had that was valuable enough to guard, and what you were doing that caused him to guard.

3) Retreat. If you already retreated because you feared a bite, go on to #4. If you stayed still, wait for some lessening of his tension and then retreat. Here's the dilemma: dogs give off guarding signals – a freeze, a hard stare, stiffening of the body, a growl, snarl, snap, or bite – to make you go away and leave them alone with their valuable objects.

Your safety is the number one priority, so if a bite is imminent, it's appropriate to skedaddle. However, by doing so you reinforce the guarding behavior. "Yes!" says Dog. "That freeze worked; it

A fake hand, mounted on the end of a stick, is used to safely assess whether this dog guards his food – obviously, he does! If a dog habitually or intensely guards food or other resources like this, find an experienced, positive behavior professional to help you. And employ scrupulous management to keep everyone safe!



Peanut guards his food bowl from the other resident dog, Otto – even though Otto couldn't care less about Peanut's food. In order to prevent future problems, we're working to counter-condition Peanut's response to having Otto near his food.

made my human go away." Reinforced behaviors are likely to repeat or increase, so you can expect more guarding next time.

If, instead, you are safe to stay still and wait for some relaxation of tension and then leave, you reinforce calmer behavior. "Hmmmmm," says Dog. "Relaxing made my human go away." If you can do this safely, you increase his relaxation when you are near him and decrease his guarding behavior.

4) Manage. Give your dog guardable things only when you won't have to take them away. Crates are good places for a resource guarder to enjoy his valuable objects. When he's crated with good stuff, don't mess with him, and don't let anyone else mess with him. When small children are around, put him away – for his sake and theirs – since you may not always know what he'll decide to guard, especially when kids bring their own toys to play with.

5) Train. Work with a good, positive behavior professional to modify your dog's guarding behavior so he no longer feels stressed when humans are around his good stuff. Teach him to "trade" on verbal cue for a high value treat such as chicken, starting with low value objects and working up to high value, so he'll happily give you his things on cue when you need him to. Outthink your dog. Resource guarding behavior is not a good place for a battle of wills.

How to React When Your Dog Begins Resource Guarding Against Other Dogs

Improve the behavior – and emotional response – of dogs who guard resources from other dogs.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC

Resource guarding is a natural, normal canine behavior. In fact it's a natural behavior for most warm-blooded animals. Even we humans guard our resources – sometimes quite fiercely. Think about it. We lock our doors. Store clerks have loaded .22 rifles under checkout counters, while homeowners keep shotguns and baseball bats leaning in the corner by the back door. Companies hire security guards. Banks keep valuables in vaults. Some of us get insanely jealous if someone pays too much attention to our significant other. I could go on . . .

Dogs guard their resources as well, sometimes quite fiercely. This is most troublesome when they guard from humans, but can also get them in hot water when they guard from other dogs. That said, some dog-dog guarding behavior is quite appropriate and acceptable. The wise dog owner not only knows the difference between appropriate and inappropriate guarding, she

also knows when and how to intervene, manage, and modify.

Guarding Scenarios

If dogs didn't guard their resources from other dogs they'd be in danger of starving – both in the wild and in multi-dog households. It's this survival instinct that triggers everything from the canine dirty look known as a "hard stare" to the ferocious blood-letting, sometimes fatal battles that can occur when dogs fight over valuable, mutually-coveted resources: food, toys, objects, locations, beds, and human attention.

There are several different scenarios that can occur when one dog chooses to guard something from another dog, ranging from a very healthy, normal interaction, to those that risk the very lives of one or more of the combatants:

1) Ideal: Dog A and Dog B are both appropriate
The ideal resource-guarding scenario probably plays itself out frequently in multi-dog households, dog parks, doggie daycares, and anyplace dogs randomly gather. It looks something like this: Dog A is chewing happily on a (insert any valuable resource here). Curious, Dog B approaches. Dog A gives Dog B "the look." Dog B quickly defers, saying, "Oh, excuse me!" by calmly turning and walking away. No harm done. Much of the time the dogs' owner isn't even aware that this occurred.

2) Second Best: Dog B is inappropriate but Dog A defers – Dog A is chewing on (insert resource). Dog B approaches. Dog A gives Dog B "the look." Dog B gives Dog A "the look" back. Dog A defers, "Oops, sorry!" by dropping the resource and leaving. Dog B was inappropriate, but Dog A didn't want to argue about it. The danger here is that somewhere along the line Dog A may get fed up with Dog B's inappropriate behavior and decide not to defer.

3) Now We're in Trouble, Part I: Dog A is inappropriate – Dog A is chewing on (insert valuable resource). Dog B approaches. Dog B would defer if warned, but rather than giving "the look," Dog A leaps into action and attacks without giving Dog B the opportunity to defer.

4) Now We're in Trouble, Part II: Dog B is socially inept – Dog A is chewing on (insert valuable resource). Dog B approaches. Dog A gives "the look." Dog B is oblivious, and keeps blundering forward, until Dog A feels compelled to escalate the intensity of his message, to aggression if necessary, to get his point across.

5) Now We're in Trouble, Part III: Dog B is inappropriate and Dog A doesn't defer – Dog A is chewing on (insert valuable resource). Dog B approaches. Dog A gives "the look." Dog B gives Dog A "the look" back. Instead of deferring, Dog A takes offense and escalates his aggressive behavior to maintain possession of his resource. Dog B reciprocates with increased aggression, and a serious fight ensues.

The same five scenarios can apply to other guarding situations – the dog who doesn't want to share his sticks or toys; who becomes tense if another dog approaches him on his bed; or who claims his owner's total and undivided attention. So whether it's food or some other valuable possession your dog is guarding, what do you do about it?

Beware, and Be Aware

First, you have to be aware of the guarding tension. It's hard to miss in Scenarios 3, 4, and 5, but if you have dogs engaged in one of the first two you may have overlooked it. Time to sit up and take notice! With Scenario 1, where both dogs respond appropriately, all you need to do is keep an eye on things and breathe a sigh of relief. As long as the pattern repeats itself, you needn't worry. You just need to stay calmly observant and take note if the pattern changes – if, for example, Dog B is slower to defer over time, which may cause an increase in Dog A's tension and possibly escalate to higher-intensity guarding. Many dogs live happily together their entire lives politely signaling and deferring in relation to valuable resources. That's how it's supposed to work – perfectly appropriate and normal.

If you see subtle signs of increasing tension, however, or if you see Scenario 2 behavior, where Dog B is bullying Dog A into giving up the

resource, you have potential trouble brewing. It's possible that Dog B will calmly defer for the rest of the dogs' lives together. You could continue to observe, and intervene only if things start to escalate. Maybe it never will. Or you could intervene with management and/or modification now, before you have significant relationship damage to repair, and a more difficult behavior modification challenge.


Oh yeah; he guards his bed, too.

Of course, anything more dramatic than Scenario 2 behavior requires immediate action in the form of management and, if you choose to do so, modification.

You Can Manage

I'm a huge fan of management. If your dogs' list of guardable items is relatively short and the dog-dog guarding interactions are reasonably predictable, then management may be a realistic option. Feed meals to your dogs or give them pig ears only when they are safely crated or closed in separate rooms. If you have a toy guarder, do toy-play with the dogs separately, and put coveted toys away when the dogs are together. Case closed.

Modification is in order, however, if battles grow increasing likely to erupt unexpectedly over an ever-growing list of miniscule triggers, such as a crumb dropped on the floor, a preferred resting spot on the rug, the hallway to the kitchen, equitably delivered treats to both dogs, or a rapidly growing radius around a valued human. Of course you'll manage in the meantime, but since management always carriers a risk of failure and guarding battles can be fierce, the more generalized the guarding, the more critically important it becomes to convince your dogs to act appropriately with other dogs in the presence of high-value resources.

Modify

Aggression is caused by cumulative stress that pushes a dog over his aggression threshold. We're all grumpier when we're stressed. Begin your modification program by minimizing as many other stressors as possible in your dogs' world. That includes creating structure and predictability in their lives; exploring and treating any possible medical conditions that may cause pain or distress; and eliminating the use of any coercive or pain-causing training tools and methods (shock, choke and prong collars, physical or harsh verbal punishment).

At the same time, incorporate calmness-inducing products and procedures such as increased aerobic exercise, the "Through a Dog's Ear" recordings, Thundershirts or Anxiety Wraps, calming massage, and TTouch.

There are a few different options for modifying resource-guarding behavior between dogs. You can classically condition Dog A (the guarder) to love having another dog around him even in the presence of valuable resources; you can operantly condition Dog A to perform a different response when he's in possession of a valuable resource and another dog approaches; and you can operantly condition Dog B to avoid the guarder when he has a valuable resource. Here's how each of these work.

Counter-Condition Dog A

The point of counter-conditioning is to change Dog A's emotional response to the proximity of Dog B in the presence of a guardable resource. This procedure will require dogs with very solid sit-stays and down-stays. Alternatively, you can

use tethers. It's critically important that Dog A not be triggered to guard during these training sessions; awareness of threshold distance and the dogs' proximity to each other is paramount.

Step 1: Start with the two dogs sitting a few feet from each other – farther, if necessary to avoid guarding behavior. Have a bowl of pea-sized, high-value treats. Give a treat to Dog B (the non-guarder), and then give one to Dog A, accompanied by happy-voice praise. If the dogs are so far apart you have to walk some distance to get to Dog A, start praising as you walk. Repeat until you see Dog A brighten noticeably when Dog B gets his treat; this tells you he's made the association between Dog B getting a treat and the next delicious treat coming to him. This is a "conditioned emotional response" (CER) – the physical manifestation of the emotional change that happens because of the pairing between the presence of the other dog and the arrival of a high-value treat.

If you start with the dogs far apart, when you have established a consistent CER with Dog A, gradually move them closer together, continuing with the counter-conditioning and achieving CERs at each new distance until the dogs are happily taking treats a few feet apart. Depending on your dogs, this could take one session or many.

Step 2: Have a bowl of high-value treats. Hang out with Dog A in a good-sized quiet room with the door closed – watch TV, read a book, work on the computer – but don't feed him any treats. In fact, ignore him completely. After 20 to 30 minutes, bring Dog B into the room on leash and have him sit. Feed him a treat, then spend 20-30 seconds giving generous treats and praise to Dog A. Then remove Dog B from the room.

At varying intervals, bring Dog B back into the room and repeat the procedure – always bringing Dog B into the room before you make any move to reach for the treats in the bowl. Repeat until Dog A looks consistently happy – the CER – as you move to bring in Dog B.

Step 3: Repeat Step 2, but this time Dog A is in possession of a guardable resource – a bone, a toy, a favorite bed. If there are things he guards less intensely than others, start with a lower-value resource.

Tether Dog A with his resource as far from the door as possible, and hang out for another 20 to 30 minutes before bringing in Dog B. Step in the door with Dog B, have him sit, feed him a treat, and then do your 20- to 30-second praise-and-treat routine with Dog A. Repeat until you have a consistent CER – Dog A brightens happily when you enter the room with Dog B.

Trainer Sarah Richardson feeds Otto (a.k.a. "Dog B") a small, high-value treat. Peanut (Dog A, the guarder) is tethered. He intently watches Otto eat.

Then Sarah feeds Peanut a treat. She repeats this Step 1 exercise a number of times. Soon, Peanut doesn't look at Otto when Otto is eating a treat . . .

Instead, the little guarder brightens and looks at Sarah every time Sarah feeds Otto, anticipating correctly that he (Peanut) will receive a treat next.

As you do these repetitions, occasionally encourage brief eye contact between the dogs several times at each distance, so that trigger gets built into the procedure. If eye contact triggers significantly greater intensity from Dog A, stay at the door until that intensity goes away and you are getting consistent CERs even with eye contact.

Gradually move closer with Dog B, obtaining consistent CERs from Dog A at each new distance before moving closer again. Remember to look for and reward some eye contact between the dogs. When you have closed the distance by half, mark that spot and start over again at the full distance, but this time with Dog A untethered. This should not trigger any tension from Dog A, and you should be able to move closer to him with Dog B more quickly than before.

Step 4: Repeat Step 3 with the same value resource, in all the rooms in the house, until Dog A displays consistent CERs everywhere.

If you have multiple dogs who Dog A guards from, repeat Steps 1 to 4 with each of the dogs. Then do the same thing with multiple dogs in the presence of Dog A and a low-value guardable resource.

Step 5: Go back to Step 3, again with Dog A tethered, but now in possession of a somewhat more valuable resource. Repeat all steps with all dogs, individually at first, then in larger groups, until Dog A offers consistent CERs regardless of what dog or what room. Continue up the resource-value ladder until Dog A shows no sign of tension

Step 6: Do occasional "cold trials" without the set-up and repetition – a deliberate "management failure" in which counter-conditioning meets real life. Do at least one cold trial per day, and if you see tension reappearing, go back and do repetitions of the procedure at whatever step is necessary for your dog to regain his equilibrium. Then move through the steps to completion – probably much more quickly than the first time through.

Operantly Condition Dog A

Resource-guarding behavior lends itself beautifully to the "Constructional Aggression Treatment" (CAT) operant conditioning protocol developed by Dr. Jesus Rosales Ruiz and Kellie Snider, MA, a few years ago at the University of North Texas. Our Dog A gets tense and eventually aggressive because he is concerned that the approaching dog is a threat to his valuable resource. These aggressive distance-increasing signals are often successful in making the other dog go away, hence they are reinforced, and behaviors that are reinforced are repeated.

Sarah demonstrates Step 3, where the guarder (Peanut) has a very guardable resource – in this case, a Kong toy stuffed with yummy treats.

She feeds Otto a treat, and then spends 20 to 30 seconds feeding one treat after another to Peanut, praising him warmly the whole time.

Within just a few repetitions, Peanut's emotional response to the sight of Otto near his Kong has changed from guarded to a happy and anticipatory.

To use the CAT procedure, tether Dog A with a low-to-moderate-value guardable resource, and approach from a distance with Dog B. If you know that Dog A begins showing signs of guarding at a distance of 15 feet, start at 25 feet. As you approach, watch Dog A for any small sign of tension. The instant you see it, stop with Dog B, mark the spot, and wait. As soon as you see any decrease in Dog A's tension, any sign of relaxation, quickly turn and walk away with Dog B, back to the 25-foot distance.

Pause there for at least 15 seconds (longer, if you think Dog A needs more recovery time), and then repeat, returning to the marker at the spot where you stopped before. Continue these repetitions until you see no sign of tension from Dog A when you arrive at the marker with Dog B.

On your next approach move four to six inches closer and mark that spot. You will likely see Dog A display signs of tension again at this distance. Repeat approaches and departures at this distance until the tension is gone, then decrease distance slightly again.

What you are doing with this procedure is teaching Dog A that a new behavior – acting calm and relaxed – makes the threat to his resource go away. As he continues to deliberately act calm and relaxed, he actually becomes calm and relaxed, and eventually no longer feels threatened by the approach of Dog B. Ideally you will see "crossover" behavior, where he acts very friendly and affiliative as Dog B approaches, offering distance-decreasing signals instead of his previous repertoire of distance-increasing signals. When you've worked through the procedure with low-to-moderate-value resources, repeat with high-value resources. With counter-conditioning, you change your dog's emotional response, and as a result his behavior changes. With operant conditioning (CAT), you change your dog's behavioral response, and as a result his emotional response changes.

Operantly Condition Dog B

You can also operantly teach Dog B a new behavior in the presence of Dog A and a valuable resource. This is a useful second line of defense, in combination with modifying the behavior of the guarder. You can teach Dog B to withdraw on your cue; you can also teach Dog B to withdraw in response to any noticeable warnings from Dog A, such as a hard stare or a lip curl. The advantage of a cue from Dog A is that it happens, and Dog B responds by leaving, even if you're not there to give your cue.

Eventually you may find that the mere presence of Dog A-with-resource becomes the cue for Dog B to leave, which is just fine and dandy. If you see Dog B leaving the room before the cue, go ahead and reinforce that – it's a good thing!

When the cue is given (yours, or Dog A's), guide (lure or prompt) Dog B to a specified target, ideally in another room. Throw a treat-and-praise fest there for Dog B, and hang out with him there for several minutes before returning to Dog A's room and repeating the process. Dog B should soon be dashing to the other room when the cue is given – either yours, or Dog A's lip curl.

So what happens if Dog A is in the designated target room with a valuable resource? Great question! It's a good idea to operantly condition Dog B to a second target location in a different room. When Dog A is in Room X, Dog B learns to target to the spot in Room Y. But if Dog A is in Room Y, Dog B learns to target to a spot in Room X.

It's Worth the Work

Keep in mind that you are likely to always need some degree of management, even with your successful modification programs. For example, even if you've done a great job of modifying the behavior of a dog who tends to guard toys, the high-arousal of a dog-to-dog game of tug carries a high likelihood of retriggering guarding aggression. Reserve his tug playing for games with you, and limit his play time with his canine pals to romping and running games. Be smart. Manage as needed, keep your eyes open for signs of returning tension, and be prepared to do a little remedial modification as needed.

So there you have it. Select the method(s) that appeal to you and get started. It will do your heart good to see the decreasing tension between your

canine family members. It will also be gratifying to see your guarder gain new associations and learn new behaviors without fear of losing his valuables to his four-legged siblings.

What you can do . . .

- **Manage, manage, manage. We cannot stress strongly enough the importance of managing your dogs' behaviors to prevent the triggering of over-threshold guarding behavior.**
- **Be observant. Watch your dog's behavior around other dogs in the presence of valuable resources to determine if everyone is being appropriate or if intervention is needed.**
- **Remember that it's natural for dogs to guard their valuables. If appropriate "go away" signals are being given and the approaching dog defers, don't interfere. That's how it's supposed to work!**

Eliminate Aggressive Dog Guarding Behaviors

Stop your dog's "resource guarding," a natural (and dangerous) behavior.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC

Dusty, our diminutive eight-pound Pomeranian, grabs a chew-hoof and darts under the coffee table with his prize. Tucker, the 75-pound Cattle Dog-mix approaches, eyeing the hoof covetously. Dusty curls his lip and emits a surprisingly convincing growl for such a tiny canine. Despite the fact that he could easily take the hoof away from the much smaller dog, Tucker backs off, leaving Dusty to chew in peace. We watch, and chuckle at the mini-drama that plays out in our living room almost daily.

It's most common for dogs to defend their food, but edible items are not the only things that dogs will keep from all potential rivals. Some dogs will defend their "ownership" of toys, a favored place to sleep, or the water bowl. Behaviorists and dog trainers call these protective behaviors "resource guarding."

A dog who defends his food from other dogs is exhibiting a perfectly normal and appropriate canine behavior. In the wild, where food supply equals life, the dog who gives up his food easily has a poor chance for survival. Because survival of individuals is important for survival of the pack, higher ranking pack members often, although not always, subscribe to a "possession is nine-tenths of the law" philosophy. It's generally not worth the risk of injury to a pack member to argue over a bit of food or bone.

Resource guarding is far less acceptable, of course, when it's directed toward us. For our own safety, we want dogs to understand that everything they have is really ours. But dogs are probably somewhat confused by our species' apparent ignorance of the "nine-tenths" rule. Accommodating creatures that they are, most dogs learn to give up coveted possessions to their owners without much of a fuss, but from time to time one of our canine pals decides to aggressively assert his ownership rights to something: a precious toy, a tasty rawhide chew, or a bowl of food. If this describes your dog, you have a serious problem on your hands.

Identify objects of dispute

The more specific the guarding, the easier the behavior is to manage. If your dog only guards truffles, say, you're pretty safe – at $20 per pound, your dog won't often stumble across a forgotten pile of the costly fungus. If anything remotely edible falls into his definition of "guardable," however, you have a much bigger challenge.

If this dog was a serious "resource guarder," this would be quite dangerous for the person. As it is, this dog is showing a low – but detectable – level of anxiety about having someone so close to his food: His tail is not wagging; his body is braced, and he's watching the person as he eats, though he does not make friendly eye contact. More serious guarding behavior might also include growling, raising his lips to show his teeth, or a quick biting attack.

Generalized food guarding is the most common manifestation of resource guarding, and often the most dangerous, since it is virtually impossible to control the presence of food in the dog's environment. No matter how diligent you are, he will inevitably find a cookie that fell between the cracks of the sofa, a bag of fast-food remnants in the gutter, or a deposit of kitty-poo in the garden. (While we may not consider cat poop to be edible, to a dog, anything consumable is food.)

Determine extent of guarding

Resource guarding describes a continuum of behaviors, all of which indicate that a dog is not comfortable with the presence of you or some other human in his "space" while he is in possession of a valuable article. Let's look at a description of various food-guarding behaviors, from those that pose no risk to the dog's human companions to those that pose a grave risk:

Level 1: The ideal and safest response when you approach Fido at his food bowl is that he stops eating, wags his tail, and comes over to greet you. He is telling you that he doesn't perceive you as a threat to his food, or if he does, he doesn't care. The food's not all that important to him; he'd be happy to share it with you.

Level 2: A slightly less perfect but still very safe reaction is that Fido looks at you, wags his tail, and continues eating, but is still relaxed about your presence in the food zone.

Level 3: The first sign of discomfort on Fido's part is usually a slight tensing of his body as you approach. He may also wag his tail. However, if the speed of the wag increases as you get closer to him and the amount of tension in his body, he is communicating that your presence near his resources makes him uncomfortable.

Level 4: As the dog's discomfort escalates, so does his behavior. At the next level you are likely to see a glare in his eye when he looks at you, perhaps a lifting of the lip in a snarl, maybe a low growl, and an obvious increase in eating speed. One very effective way to prevent you from getting any of his food is for him to eat it quickly.

Give-and-Take: A Good Game for ALL Dogs to Learn

You can help *prevent* resource guarding in a dog who does not display overt signs of the behavior by teaching him a give-and-take game. **NOTE:** Do not do this if your dog lunges and aggressively tries to grab treats out of your hand.

Start by offering him a toy that he likes (but is not *extremely* valuable to him). When he opens his mouth, say "Take It!" When he does, tell him he's a good boy, then offer him a treat.

When he opens his mouth to take the treat and drops the toy, say "Give," (or "Trade," or "Share") and *let him nibble at the treat while you pick up the toy.* The nibbling part is important. If you let him eat the treat and *then* try to pick up the toy he will race you for it, which may actually encourage resource guarding.

While he is nibbling, slowly and calmly pick up the toy. Let him finish eating the treat, then offer him the toy again and say "Take It!" as he puts his mouth around it.

Practiced several times a day, a few repetitions at a time, this game will teach your dog the very useful behavior of "Give" on cue. He will also learn that if he gives something up to you, odds are good that he'll get it back again, or something even better.

Troubleshooting

If he won't take the toy: Find a toy that he likes more. If he is only a mild resource guarder (Level 3 or 4) you can even use a toy such as a Kong with a cookie inside it. Use a low-value treat (a bland cookie or cracker) in the toy, and a much higher-value treat (a piece of cheese or roast beef) for his reward.

If he won't drop the toy for the treat: You need a much better treat. Don't be stingy here; hard dry cookies and bits of dog kibble just may not be exciting enough to convince him to give up a toy that he likes. Even the toughest nut will usually crack for something like a piece of sardine or a baby-food hot dog.

If after a couple of times he just looks for the treat and ignores the toy: Good! You're convincing him that the stuff you have is better than the stuff he has. That's what you *want* him to think. You can either plan to do just a few repetitions each session, or you can *gradually* increase the value of the object he shares with you.

Once your dog has learned to play the give-and-take game, you can use it for objects other than toys. When he grabs something he shouldn't have, such as your new Nikes or the remote control, instead of playing the "Chase" game, go get a nice treat and ask him to share. He should be happy to trade.

If your dog won't trade you his object for the treat in your hand, or worse, starts to guard it aggressively, drop high-value treats on the ground in a trail that leads away from the object. When he drops it to follow the treat trail, wait until he is far away from it and have someone else pick it up, or leave him a large pile of treats and calmly walk back to the object and pick it up yourself. If necessary, Hansel-and-Gretel him with a treat trail into another room and close the door before you pick it up. Then reevaluate your training program to figure out where you went wrong, and consider calling in a professional to help you.

Paws rushes to take a toy. Don't use your dog's *favorite* toy at first. He should want it, but not be obsessed with it.

After just a couple of treats, Paws readily drops the ball for a treat. He doesn't mind Sandi's reach for the ball.

After more repetitions, Paws doesn't want the toy at all. That's fine! He *should* anticipate rewards for sharing.

Level 5: If the food is portable, such as a chew-hoof or pig ear, at this level, the dog may carry the item under a chair, a bed, or into his crate, then growl at you when you come too near. If he can't pick it up, he may try to push the food bowl farther away from you when you continue to trespass.

Level 6: A serious food-guarder is more than willing to put some teeth into his warnings. A snap is the next step on the continuum – no contact with your flesh, but a no-uncertain-terms statement that Fido is not prepared to share his food with you.

Level 7: As Fido's protectiveness increases, so does the threat to your safety (or the safety of the child passing by). More serious than a snap is the actual bite. Rarely does a food-guarding bite not break skin – the contact is usually very quick and hard, and may consist of several puncturing bites that move up the transgressor's arm or face.

Level 8: Severe food guarding can be triggered even at a distance. At the strongest level, even a person on the far side of the room can be perceived as a threat to the highly valued food or item, and the dog's behavior can escalate very quickly and alarmingly with a seemingly innocuous movement, even from far away.

Behavior modification

The key to winning the resource guarding battle lies in:

1.) excellent management of guardable resources in the dog's presence, and

2.) convincing the dog that your presence is not a threat to his food supply.

Rather, he needs to see you as the welcome harbinger of all delicious consumables. Your presence near your dog should be a reliable predictor of the advent of more good stuff, not less. Your role as benevolent distributor of valuable resources is the foundation of your behavior management and modification program.

The good news is that not all dogs who display low levels of guarding behavior will advance to higher levels. The behavior you see may be the worst that they ever offer, especially if you implement a behavior modification program before the response escalates. The prognosis for successful behavior modification improves greatly if you begin a program as soon as possible.

The bad news is that higher level dogs don't necessarily give you lower level warnings before they launch an attack. Higher levels of resource guarding can be very challenging to modify.

Meanwhile, the behavior presents an extremely high risk of injury to those around the dog, especially children.

A skilled and knowledgeable owner may be able to effectively modify food guarding behavior up to Level 4 or 5. Anything beyond that definitely begs the assistance of a qualified trainer or behaviorist. A person who is not confident about working with the dog's behavior at lower levels, or who tries and does not make progress, should also seek professional help with the dog.

It can be a lot of work to manage and modify the behavior of a resource-guarder. You will have to:

- Manage the behavior through resource control unless and until the behavior has been completely and successfully modified. You must identify and remove all potential guarding triggers. Food bowls, even empty ones, should not be left lying on the floor. Stuffed Kongs, favorite toys, balls, pillows – anything that triggers even a mild possession response – needs to be put away, and given to the dog only in very controlled circumstances.

- Relocate the dog's feeding area from a high traffic area to a low one to minimize risk. A dog regularly fed in the kitchen may guard the entire room. A dog fed on the back porch may guard the entire yard. Choose a little-used room, at least 10 feet wide, that visitors are not likely to stumble into, such as the basement office or the pantry.

- Spend two to four weeks preparing your dog for the program. Feed two to three times a day. Confine him away from the feeding area. Place the food bowl in the feeding room, bring the dog to the room, leave the room, and close the door until he has finished eating, up to 30 minutes.

- Attend a positive dog training class using a variety of desirable food treats as rewards. (Do not do this if your dog lunges aggressively for food in your hand). Be sure to let the trainer know that your dog is a resource-guarder.

- Implement a "Nothing in Life is Free" program, where the dog has to earn all good things. Have him sit or lie down in order to get anything he wants, including food, toys, attention, and going outside to play.

- Exercise him more. A tired dog is a well-behaved dog. Weather permitting, three to four 15-20 minute tongue-dragging sessions of fetch can work wonders in reducing inappropriate behaviors. Watch out for heat stroke; do not overdo exercise in hot weather. Spend more time with the dog in general, doing things that you both enjoy.

- Identify and avoid situations that trigger aggression.

- Teach the dog to "Give" on cue (see "Give-and-Take," page 19).

- Avoid punishing the dog should a food-guarding or other aggressive incident occur.

- Implement a desensitization program (see food bowl desensitization) after two to four weeks of doing all of the above. This complete program can take four to eight months or longer.

The final outcome

Some dogs are successfully and completely rehabilitated through resource guarding modification programs, especially those who exhibit only the lower level behaviors. Many are not. There is a strong likelihood that you will always need to reinforce your resource guarder's new nonguarding behavior, and avoid situations that could retrigger the guarding.

Because small children almost always come with food – cookies, crackers, etc. – and they are naturally closer to the dog's own level, many prior resource guarders are never trustworthy around children. Of course, dogs and small children should never be left together unsupervised, but this goes far beyond that. Many families understandably choose to rehome their resource-guarding dogs rather than risk a serious bite.

Of course, finding a good home for a dog with a history of aggression is yet another big challenge. Rehabilitating a resource guarder can take a huge commitment of time, resources, and emotion. Throughout the program, you, other family members, and visitors to your home are at risk of being bitten if there are inadvertent slips in the program.

We applaud responsible dog owners who are willing to make the commitment required to change their dogs' behaviors. We also urge them to think long and hard about their commitment and liablility, and to be realistic about whether they are able to do what it takes to ensure the safety of others during the process of reprogramming a resource-guarder. And we cheer when we receive reports from those who have been successful in getting their dogs to "share."

Food Bowl Desensitization

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC

This program can take four to eight months (or longer) to rehabilitate a serious food- guarder – and even then, your dog may never become completely trustworthy. If at any point you are

fearful or feel inadequate to deal with the dog, call a qualified positive professional trainer or behaviorist. This program should be implemented only by adults or very responsible older teens. Do not move to the next phase before the minimum time indicated, or before the dog's demeanor is perfectly calm at the previous phase. Also, keep in mind that following the program outlined below does not guarantee your safety.

Phase 1: No bowl (one to two weeks) Place the dog's daily meal in a bowl on a counter or shelf in his feeding room. Include some high-value treats as part of the meal. Schedule several feeding sessions throughout the day. Feed him one-quarter to one-tenth of his day's ration in each session, a piece at a time, by hand. If he lunges aggressively at your hand while feeding, tether him and feed him his meals, a piece at a time, by tossing them from just out of lunging reach. Wait until he is sitting quietly each time to toss him another piece.

Phase 2: Empty bowl, single pieces (two to four weeks) Schedule several feeding sessions throughout the day. Place the dog's daily meal in a bowl on a counter or shelf in his feeding room. Place his empty bowl on the ground at your feet. Alternate between feeding him several pieces from your hand, a piece at a time, and drop- ping several pieces of food, a piece at a time, into his food bowl from waist height. Wait until he has finished each piece before drop- ping the next.

Phase 3: Empty bowl, multiple pieces (two to four weeks) During several feeding sessions throughout the day, place the dog's daily meal in a bowl on a counter or shelf in his feeding room. Place his empty bowl on the ground at your feet. Drop several pieces of food into his food bowl and wait until he has finished them. Then feed him several pieces, one at a time, from your hand. Now drop several more pieces into his bowl. While he is eating those, drop more treats, one at a time, into his bowl from waist height.

Phase 4: Two partial bowls (two to four weeks) Again, schedule several feedings throughout the day, and place the dog's meal in a bowl on a counter or shelf in his feeding room. Put a handful of food in each of two bowls and place one bowl on the floor. Put lower-value food into the bowls; save the higher-value food for treat dropping. If you cannot safely put down the bowl in your dog's presence, tether him, put him on a sit-stay, or shut him out of the room while you put the bowl down.

As he progresses, the dog's expression should change from vigilant to relaxed.

While he is eating from the first bowl, place the second bowl on the floor a safe distance away. "Safe" will depend on your dog, and could be as much as 10-15 feet or more. Err on the side of caution. Return to the first bowl and drop treats into it as he continues to eat.

When he has finished the first bowl, stop dropping treats and direct him to the second bowl. While he is eating from the second bowl, return to the first bowl and pick it up. Continue to drop treats into the bowl from which he is eating.

Over the two to four weeks of this phase, very gradually – a few inches at a time – place the bowls closer and closer together. Watch for signs of tension or aggression. If you see any, you have closed the distance too quickly; go back to the distance between bowls where he was relaxed and work at that distance for several days before moving the bowls closer together again.

Phase 5: Several partial bowls (two to four weeks)
Repeat the previous phase, using several bowls (up to six). You can prepare all the bowls at the same time and set them on the counter, but place them on the floor one at a time, while he is eating from the first bowl. Continue to drop treats into the bowl he is eating from, and occasionally pick up an empty one that is a safe distance from the dog. During this phase, re-duce the number of meals to two or three. Also look for opportunities outside of feeding time to drop treats near the dog when he is in possession of other reasonably valuable items.

Phase 6: Calling the dog (two to four weeks)
Repeat Phase 5, except try to call the dog to you from a distance of six to eight feet just as he finishes the food in a bowl. Have the other bowls set out so he must pass you to go to another bowl. Be sure to give him a very high value treat when he comes to you. Gradually start asking him to come to you before he fin- ishes the food in the bowl – first, when he is almost done, then when there is more and more left. As long as he stays relaxed, gradually move closer to the food bowl he is eating from before you call him.

Practice this phase for at least one full week before moving closer to him. Also, look for opportunities outside of feeding time to call him to you to feed him high value treats when he is in possession of other reasonably valuable items.

Phase 7: Adding people (two to six weeks)
Starting back at Phase 1, have a second person repeat the exercises. This should be another person who is close to the dog, not a child, and not a stranger. Have the person move through the phases, spending up to a week at each phase or longer if necessary. If he is doing well with a second person, add a third, then a fourth. Be sure to use people who are well-educated as to their training duties, and able to follow directions.

Phase 8: Coming out of the closet (two to six weeks, for the rest of the dog's life)
Again, starting back at Phase 1, move the food bowl exercises out of the dog's feeding room into other areas of the house: the kitchen, the dining room, the den, etc. Assuming the training has been progressing well, you should be able to move through the phases relatively quickly. Continue to look for other real-life resource-relevant opportunities to reinforce the message that your presence means more good stuff. Remember that, depending on the success of your desensitization program, your resource- guarding dog may never be totally reliable in the presence of valuable items. For the rest of your dog's life, always be aware of the environment and be prepared to intervene if there is a potential risk.

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