

Resource Guarding in Dogs

What is Resource Guarding?

Resource guarding is a behavioral issue in dogs where they become possessive food, toys, beds, or people, often displaying antisocial behaviors (growling, showing teeth, attacking, etc) towards nearby targets. These behaviors can be directed at other animals, especially other dogs, as well as towards people. Resource guarding is a very common behavior, especially in rescue dogs, the “runts” of the litter, and dogs in a social situation where resources are limited and there is not enough for everyone to have an equal amount.

Rehabilitation of resource guarding takes time and work. Occasionally, once dogs settle in and realize that they will be able to have three meals a day and all the toys they want, they will stop guarding these resources. However, the vast majority of dogs do need some rehabilitation. These dogs feel like they need to fight to keep everything they have or it will be taken from them. Many rescue dogs and “runt” dogs have had to fight at a very young age to get enough food to survive. Patience is key! Try to see it from the dog’s perspective.

Rehabilitating Dogs with Resource Guarding Towards Other DOGS

Threshold Reduction is the best way to reduce Resource Guarding that is directed towards other dogs. A “Threshold” is the distance from the target (other dog) at which the dog first starts displaying his guarding behaviors. The goal of these exercises is to teach your dog to be more comfortable with his resources with another dog nearby him. Reducing this threshold while asking the Guarding dog to ignore the Target dog is called “Honoring.” It is a good idea to make sure that all resources are kept away from the dogs when they are free together until the Guarding dog is comfortable. Every negative interaction can set training way back.

Threshold Reduction (General)

This exercise requires two people.

1. To find this threshold and begin the rehabilitation, leash both dogs on opposite sides of the room, give the “Guarding” dog a resource (food, bone, toys).
2. Allow the Guarding dog to begin chewing/eating/playing on his own with the resource.
3. Slowly walk the “Target” dog towards the Guarding dog. Watch the Guarding dog for the first signs that he is becoming uncomfortable:
 - a. Stopping chewing/playing
 - b. Stiffening of the muscles, especially legs and neck
 - c. Hackles (fur on back of neck) raised
 - d. Growling/showing teeth
 - e. Head stiff over the resource without interacting with it
4. Now that you know where the threshold is, keep the Target dog just outside the threshold. Work on obedience/tricks (sit, down, touch, paw, etc) with the Guarding dog and have the resource be a reward for the training. Keep the Guarding dog’s attention on you.
5. Slowly move the Target dog (one step at a time) towards the Guarding dog while his attention is on his handler. Keep the Target dog’s attention on his handler to keep social pressure off of the Guarding dog.

6. Reward the Guarding dog heavily for each step the Target dog takes towards the Guarding dog as long as he remains focused on you and his object and he is not displaying any signs of guarding or antisocial behaviors.
7. If the Guarding dog starts exhibiting discomfort at the closeness of the other dog, take a few steps back and practice at that threshold. It might take days to weeks to make noticeable progress.

Threshold Reduction (Feeding)

Eating together is a very bond building exercise for dogs. Getting the dogs to eat next to each other while not allowing them to eat each other's food can help the Guarding dog realize that his feeding space will be respected and he doesn't need to fight to protect it. Dogs CAN learn which bowl is theirs, and which is not. They CAN learn not to eat out of each other's bowls and respect each other's meals. This takes time and work, but creates dogs that do not fight over their food. It is also helpful if you have dogs that are eating two different foods or a dog that is on prescription food.

1. Similar as above. Find the Guarding dog's threshold. Start feeding the dogs that far apart.
2. Dogs should be supervised during eating AT ALL TIMES!
3. Make sure both dogs are leashed so that they can stay physically separated to prevent fighting.
4. Over the course of weeks, slowly move the dogs closer together as they eat, preventing them from trying to forage from each other's bowls. If a dog makes a move towards the other's bowls, correct with an "uh-uh" and redirect him back to his bowl.
5. If the dogs eat at different speeds, make sure the slower dog retains your protection while he finishes his meal. Reward the faster dog for leaving the slower dog alone while he finishes eating by placing a few kibbles into his empty bowl.
 - a. Sometimes purchasing a maze-bowl or adding a little water to the kibble to slow down the faster eater can create harmony more quickly.

Threshold Reduction (Down Stays)

Relaxing near each other is also a bond building exercise. Dogs that fight over food can learn to take their treat nicely with other dogs around. I build this behavior using progressively closer down stays. This is easier with two people, but only one is needed.

1. Build a good 10 second down-stay in your dog. If your dog does not know how to down on command or stay on command, work on these first.
2. Find the Guarding dog's treat Threshold. Put him in a down-stay, then put the Target dog in a down stay just outside the threshold.
3. Reward both dogs after 10 seconds.
4. Move the Target dog one step closer and put him back in a down stay.
5. Reward both dogs after 10 seconds
6. Continue moving the Target dog slightly closer and rewarding both dogs after 10 seconds.
7. If the Guarding dog shows discomfort, move the Target dog a few steps away and keep practicing

Rehabilitating Dogs with Resource Guarding Towards PEOPLE

In general, dogs that guard resources around people have their stuff taken roughly away from them at some point. Preventing this behavior from developing is very important and can be achieved through trading a small treat every time you take something from the dog. However, you can extinguish this behavior through patience and time. This is achieved through “Trading”. It is important to be able to safely take things away from your dog. Dogs get into all kinds of things they shouldn’t, whether they are holding a dead deer leg, a bottle of pills, or your favorite shoe.

Trading and Teaching the “Drop” Command.

It is important to be very patient and gentle during this training. Any attempt to force the object away from the dog will only make the behavior problem worse. Punishing the dog for guarding a resource will only teach him that he needs to fight harder for it. Obviously if the object will endanger the dog’s health, other measures may need to be taken for the dog’s safety. The best course of action is to keep any and all “resources” out of the dog’s reach during this training. It is also important that you are not acting afraid of the dog during this training. Make it a fun training event, not a stressful one. Any negative emotions you have will only cause the dog to distrust you and not want to give up his prize to you.

1. Have two identical toys of a type that your dog would love and not want to give back to you.
2. Give one of the toys to your dog.
3. Proceed to play with the other toy yourself. Make a big deal out of how fun YOUR toy is.
4. Eventually, your dog will think that the toy YOU have is more fun than his toy and will drop his toy to try to get yours.
 - a. Sometimes it can take days to weeks for the dog to give up the toy the first time. Try not to get frustrated and practice in short sessions. Always end the sessions on a good note. It is better to let the dog keep the toy and end it there than to try to force the dog to give up the toy.
5. Reward your dog with praise for dropping the toy by giving/throwing your toy to him.
6. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
7. Once your dog is readily dropping his toy for yours, add the command “drop” right before he drops it. Reward heavily with praise and giving him your toy.
8. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
9. Make your toy less fun. Ask your dog to “drop” the toy he has. If he drops the toy, jackpot reward him with lots of praise and play time.
10. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
11. Now reward with a treat instead of the other toy. Make sure it is a good, high value treat like a piece of hot dog or bacon or liver. If he won't drop the toy for a treat, make a big deal about how tasty the treat is. I usually say “ooh, look at what I have! Its so tasty!” etc. Be distracting with how amazing the treat you have is so that he forgets about his toy.
12. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
13. Replace the high value treat for a lower value treat like a crunchy biscuit and practice “drop” with that.
14. ALWAYS trade with your dog when you want him to give up something he values. Trade EVERY TIME so that your dog learns that only GOOD things will happen if he gives up his prizes instead of bad things.

Resource Guarding With Food

Teaching Impulse Control with a dog that has food aggression is a key way to reducing that aggression. Dogs with food aggression get so intense about their food that they can't control themselves around it. Teaching them that if they are polite and wait for their food then they can eat will cause them to be less intense about it. Again, you have to be calm and manage your reactions. If you jerk back and show fear, the dog won't trust that you are doing a good thing for them by teaching them this exercise. This needs to be practiced EVERY time you feed your dog. If you are in a rush, you don't have to make them follow the rules for long, but they do need to follow them! If your dog eats too quickly to make progress, try using a maze bowl or softening their food with a bit of water to slow them down.

1. Start by teaching your dog to "sit". If your dog knows sit, then have them sit while you hold their food bowl. Slowly lower the bowl to the ground. If the butt comes up, the food comes up.
2. If the dog remains seated, place the food down in front of them (if the dog is very aggressive, you may need to be a few feet away) and tell them to "wait". If the butt comes up, the food comes back up.
3. If the dog remains seated for even just a second, say "ok!" and let the dog eat. Gradually increase the time you make the dog wait for its food until the dog will sit there for at least 1 minute.
4. Once the dog is sitting politely waiting for its food, ask for eye contact. Start where just a quick glance achieves the "ok" to get the food. Gradually increase the eye contact to 5-10 seconds before giving the "ok". This teaches the dog to look to you for permission to eat. If this behavior is built into him enough with muscle memory, he will start seeking permission not only to eat, but with other things as well. It is bond building and also gives you more direct control over his actions.
5. Sit with the dog at a respectful distance while he is eating. Throw super tasty treats towards him at intervals so that he equates your presence while you eat with good things happening. To prevent the dog becoming overweight, it may be a good idea to lower his food amount while performing this task. Gradually sit closer and closer to the dog. If he shows signs of guarding (stiff muscles, intense eating, not eating, bowl hovering), do not get closer, just toss a few treats in his direction and otherwise ignore him.
6. As your dog gets better about your presence, you can start trying the steps below to fully condition him and prevent relapses.

Preventing Resource Guarding with Food

Because resource guarding is so common in rescue dogs, and because we live in a world where dogs are not allowed to fight to keep what they have from each other or from any human, we have to prepare the dog to learn that there is no danger to his meal by having a person hanging around. This is especially important if small children are in the mix. They may want to go say hi to the dog while he is eating and pet him. Smaller kids may want to explore whatever the dog finds so fascinating in his bowl. You can prevent incidents by preparing your dog to be used to stuff happening to and around him while he is eating.

1. Don't let your kids bother the dog while he is eating. Even friendly, loving dogs can have a bad day and being annoyed by a child while you're trying to have your dinner can try the nicest dog's patience. It is best to teach a child to respect the dog's space while having his food.

2. That said, stuff happens, so to start preparing your dog to deal with “stuff” happening there are a few steps to try. First sit in the room with the dog while he eats. Talk to him. If you notice signs he is uncomfortable, toss a few really tasty treats in his direction, sit down, and make yourself unimposing.
3. If your dog is comfortable with you hanging out while he eats, move closer and drop a few treats in his bowl while he is eating. Get as close as you can without seeing any signs that he is uncomfortable with you. This will teach him that when hands come near his bowl, good things happen!
4. If your dog is enjoying the treats and comfortable with step 3, start gently petting his back while you talk to him. NEVER reach out and touch him if he isn't aware of your presence. You don't want to startle him into reacting.
5. If he is fine with this, start touching other parts of his body: his ears, his feet, and his tail. If at any time he appears uncomfortable stop, take a step back, and then reward him for continuing to eat by dropping more treats in his bowl.
6. Once he is comfortable being touched and talked to, reach your hand towards his bowl with a treat and let him eat it out of your hand in his bowl. Do not do this if he showed any signs of being uncomfortable in step 3, continue working on step 3 until he is comfortable with your hand being near his bowl.
7. Once he is comfortable with step 6, reach your hand in and grab some kibbles and feed them to him. Play with his food while he eats and reward him with treats at the same time.
8. Once your dog is fully comfortable with you around his food, practice with new people, starting over from step 1. Continue practicing these steps yourself at least twice a month to make sure your dog remains comfortable having people around his food.