

Resource Guarding Tips for Dogs Who Growl Over Toys or Food

We have all heard the expression “possession is 9/10ths of the law,” which means that ownership is easier to maintain if one is in possession of something. Well, this philosophy is certainly true when it comes to dogs.



By Kelley Bollen

If a dog has a bone or a toy, it is not likely that another dog will challenge that dog to gain possession of the item. This is also why if the cat is lying in a dog’s bed, the dog will lie next to the bed moping instead of chasing the cat out. While most dogs live by this rule, some dogs take it to a dangerous level and become aggressive when guarding their possessions. We call this behavior “resource guarding,” and it can be difficult to deal with when the aggression is directed to us.

Dogs with the propensity to resource guard can exhibit aggressive behavior when someone goes near them while they are eating or when in possession of a valuable resource such as a bone, toy, stolen object, or found object. Some dogs exhibit guarding behavior over resting places (their dog bed, the sofa, the owner’s bed, etc.) and can become aggressive when someone comes near or tries to remove them from the location.

Most of the time, there is a genetic component to resource guarding. This means that dogs are born with the propensity to guard coveted items. Resource guarding can get worse due to environmental influences however. Owners often make resource guarding worse by their response – typically through punishment. For example, if a dog growls when a person goes near her when she has a bone and the person yells and takes the bone away anyway – the dog doesn’t learn that guarding is bad, she learns that growling doesn’t work to retain the bone. The consequence of this punishment can lead the dog to escalate to snapping or biting the next time she has something and a person tries to take it. Physical punishment is *never* advisable with a resource-guarding dog as this response usually makes the behavior worse.

The behavior modification program to work on resource guarding involves systematic desensitization (start at a low stimulus strength and slowly increase it over time) and positive counterconditioning (using something the dog loves to change the response from negative to positive). We want the dog to learn that *not* guarding is more reinforcing than guarding. To do this, we first determine at what distance away from the dog he starts to exhibit the resource guarding behavior and then, starting farther away from that point, we approach and toss a yummy treat to the dog. We do this over and over at that distance until the dog actively looks happy to see you coming because he anticipates that you are going to toss a yummy treat, and then we move a step closer and repeat the process. You would do this until you can walk right up to the dog when he has something or when he is lying in a coveted location and hand him the treat. We will have successfully changed the way he feels about your approach from negative to positive.

It is also important to teach the dog to “drop it,” which means to spit out the item when requested for a reward and to “leave it,” which means to move away from the item to earn a reward. Using



extra special yummy treats (usually chunks of meat) is important because you want the reward to be more special than the thing the dog typically guards.

If the dog ever growls at you during this process, *do not* punish her – simply take note of how close you were and stay farther away next time. Remember growling is communication and, if you punish the warning signal, the dog could escalate to a much more dangerous behavior.

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