

Resource Guarding



By Kelly Byrne

When you hear the term resource guarding in dogs, it generally is about a dog getting grumpy when someone comes near their food. But in reality, it's the dog defending anything that it sees as valuable to them, because they fear it's going to be taken from them.

My dog couldn't care less about her food, but she looooved the cardboard roll from a roll of toilet paper. This was like gold to her. She would trot off happily with it, bury it, ten minutes later decide that wasn't a secure enough spot, then dig it up and rebury it. Then she would lay down and guard it against thieves.

Whenever we get a call about resource guarding, it's usually when it's gotten pretty bad. The dog growls, snaps, lunges in an ever-widening radius around its food (or toys, bed, owner etc.) Sometimes it's actually bitten someone.

But dogs don't start off behaving like this. This level of aggression comes after having a lot of small successes over a period of time that have built up the dogs' confidence in its behaviour and reinforced its belief in needing to protect the object. It may have started as a small grumble when you went to take the food bowl away, not realising there was still a little bit left in there. You backed off. The dog realises that all it needs to do to get you to leave its stuff alone is to display aggression.

But we also see this as an issue that the owners have actually created, when it was never there previously. Usually this occurs when the old school belief that you absolutely must be able to take high value food off of your dog, to prove to it who's boss, is put to the test. The owner yells, threatens, intimidates, sometimes even beats the dog until it gives up its bone, pigs ear etc. One of the biggest problems with this (and there are many) is that the dog can learn that it may not be able to beat you when it comes to its food, but it might back itself in taking on the young child that walks past.

So instead of creating an aversive situation, it's better to be creative a positive relationship between you and food, toys etc. Even if your dog doesn't display any resource guarding now, you can be proactive. Start with the dogs' food bowl having a small amount of bland food like plain rice or kibble. While the dog is eating, from a distance you start adding small pieces of food that is better, like liver treats. Eventually you get closer to the bowl. Once your dog is comfortable with that, you then start with something slightly more appealing, perhaps tinned food or minced meat, then again at a distance



add something better – bacon, cheese, chicken necks etc., gradually moving closer.

The point to this exercise is that instead of taking something away from the dog, you're actually giving it something better, as well as letting it keep what it had. In human terms, you've got \$1 and I'm coming up to you and giving you \$10. You'd be pretty happy to see me then, wouldn't you?

The added benefit to this is that your dog will often see you coming towards them and actually back away from their food, to see what you're going to give them next.

Eventually you get to a point where you reach a super high value item, usually a bone. How do you top a bone? With a bigger bone. Saying a term like "give" when your dog drops one bone (or ball or toy) to take the new one also teaches them an out command, so that when you want them to give you whatever is in their mouth, they will do so happily and not from fear.

All this requires repetition, time and patience. Each dog is obviously different and will place different values on things, so you may need to tweak techniques here and there, but it's a great place to start. If you need further information or advice on resource guarding, contact a reputable trainer or behaviourist. 🐾

