

Dealing with Resource Guarding in the Moment

What It Is

Resource guarding refers to a pet perceiving a threat to a resource they value and displaying behaviors designed to keep others, such as another pet or a person, away from that resource. Some of these behaviors might include the animal stiffening or hovering over the resource as another approaches, moving their body or head in between the resource and the perceived threat, freezing, suddenly slowing or stopping eating, or eating more vigorously. More overt warning signs can include a hard, direct stare, a lip curl, growl, bark, air snap, or a lunge. A dog might progress to a nip or bite if the perceived threat comes too close to the resource.

This handout is intended as a way to resolve a resource-guarding situation “in the moment” and minimize risks and potential injuries to people and pets. It is in no way comprehensive and should not be viewed as a “treatment” for resource guarding. If you observe resource guarding, advise the client to seek help from a qualified professional, such as a veterinary behaviorist or the pet’s vet working in combination with a reward-based trainer.

Multiple animals

- For multiple animals, it’s important to reduce mealtime competition by feeding the animals in visually and physically separated areas; keeping animals separated in their own spaces (or directly and carefully supervised for those animals who are not comfortable with being left alone) for the duration of the meal. It’s best to wait to reintegrate the animals until after all food and food-dispensing items are empty and picked up.
- For a dog that becomes upset when a housemate dog receives a valued resource like treats or attention, add structure and predictability to the interactions. For example, ask each dog to do simple behaviors such as a sit and offer eye contact with the handler. This helps provide a sense of ‘fairness’ and help ease any sense of competition and threat.
- After feeding the animals, consider preventing the dogs from rushing up into the space where the other dog was previously eating, as this could appear threatening and cause the other dog to react defensively. One way to do this is by doing an activity immediately after mealtime that happily redirects the animals (such as a potty break, short walk, or moving to the living room area to relax together).
- Ideally dogs can share a living space with plentiful toys among them. However, especially valuable toys may need to be picked up and either kept away unless the dog is in their own safe space and separate from the other animals.
- If a housemate dog is approaching a dog known to guard food/objects who is chewing on something of high value, interrupt and redirect the approaching dog. For instance, say the dog’s name, using a quiet clap or kissing noise that can then be followed up with other actions that move the animal to a different area.

Managing Resource Guarding

- Identify ahead of time any potential issues that may provoke stress or aggressive behavior, including mealtime, treasured toys, or chews. This helps pet sitters be all the more prepared by keeping potential items of value under close supervision.
- For a dog who is known to guard food, bones, or chews, always give him plenty of space to eat or chew. Never go near, touch, or pick up his food bowl or chew while he is consuming it. Wait until he has either finished it or abandoned it and moved completely out of the area.
- For a dog who resource guards areas such as the bed, it's best to give the dog an alternative sleeping area, such as their safe space and to avoid co-sleeping. Never force the dog off the bed, couch, or other area they are guarding. Instead, if it is necessary to move them, entice them off with a high-value treat by tossing it away from the bed or couch or if that is not a safe option, use another distraction to prompt the pet to move (see distraction tips in Quick Stop Tips).
- If you do need to take something from a resource-guarding animal (for example, something that is dangerous for them), it's important to replace it with something the animal finds even more valuable. This reduces the animal's perception of there being a threat to their resource. If the animal is chewing on something dangerous, a handful of high-value meaty food treats might be required to direct his attention away from the dangerous item. Do this by tossing the treats, keeping your hands well away from the animal's mouth, in the hopes that he lets go of the dangerous item to retrieve the tossed treats.
- Do not do this in a multiple-pet household if the food might be a resource that could be guarded or cause a fight.
- For serious guarders, it is better to get them out of the area completely before attempting to approach the item. Place them in another room or safe confinement area. If they see you pick up the item while they are eating the treats, they might lunge toward you.
- Generally speaking, to help a dog who is resource guarding, you should never just take the resource away from him. Instead, add positive outcomes to instill a happy, joyful response, rather than a sense of scarcity or threat. This helps to change the animal's underlying emotion about people or other animals approaching while they eat or enjoy a valued possession, place, or person.

Quick-stop tips

- Use a distraction to get a dog to release, move away from, or lose interest in the item they have. This may include ringing the doorbell, opening the fridge, opening a door to go outside to a fenced yard, going to the garage, grabbing the keys like it's time to get in the car, getting the leash, putting on your shoes, or pretending there's someone at the door you're suddenly talking to. This can signal the start of another activity and allow enough of a distraction to lessen the dog's focus on the item they're guarding and allow for easier removal of the item as the dog is distracted.
- Toss a high-value treat or handful of treats away from the valued item to get the dog away from the item. Place the dog in another room or safe confinement area to allow you to remove it while the dog is away and not able to see you.

Offer referrals

- As with all behavior issues, seek help from a professional, such as a veterinary behaviorist or the pet's vet working in combination with a reward-based trainer.

