



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Resource Guarding

Your dog's guarding behavior might be subtle or might involve him snarling when you get close to his food bowl or snapping when you or your child try to take his favorite toy away. These behaviors can be threatening or downright scary. If any guarding behaviors are left untreated – even the subtle ones – they are only reinforced and can easily and quickly become more problematic over time.

Resource guarding:

Wolves work very hard for scarce pieces of food; when they've attained even a tiny morsel, they don't let go easily. Food is high on the list of things guarded by dogs too. But don't forget that today's modern dog can extend this territoriality to more than just food; couches, toys, blankets, even aunt Rita, can all be considered valued resources worth guarding. Once you realize dogs are genetically programmed to do so, with no hidden agenda or malice, then working toward ridding them of this perceived threat becomes much easier. The key is teaching them that it's no big deal. In fact, they want you and others hanging around "their" stuff, since it means only good things for them in return.

Without meaning to, we tend to teach dogs that food = alone time. We feed them big meals in a dish, and then promptly leave. Dogs quickly learn then that food time is a time to be enjoyed alone. Going from this to suddenly having a screaming toddler sit in your kibble can be quite the adjustment for any dog.

Instead, start hanging around him when he eats. Make it a family affair. Also, until your dog is perfectly trained in your eyes, why not eliminate the food dish altogether and hand-feed his meal? You can reserve your dog's daily diet in installments to be fed out during training (ie-loose-leash training on walks), behavior modification (i.e.—getting him to like the mailman), or times spent alone inside of toys and puzzle feeders (so as to avoid separation anxiety or destruction of your favorite shoes). This way, your dog learns you're in control of the food resources, but you're happy to share when he's behaving nicely. It gives him a great incentive to learn and keeps him physically and mentally stimulated throughout the day, even when you're gone! Additionally, allowing

him to approach you and accept food from your hand (or conversely, allowing him to go away if he's afraid) immediately alters the atmosphere, making both dog and owner much more relaxed from the get-go.

Turn feeding time into a training exercise: Practice "come" and "sit" for each handful of food. After a few rounds of this, ask your dog for a sit, and when she does, put down her food dish with a few pieces of her kibble as her reward. Stand there as she laps it up. Once she's done and looking to you for a refill, (perfect! She wants you near her dish!) bend down and toss another few pieces of kibble into the dish. If at any point she is already nervous, take a step back and allow her to get away. However, she also doesn't get any food for backing away. If she seems relaxed with your proximity, hand feed a piece of kibble to your dog as you pick up her empty dish. Then ask for a behavior; if she does it, set it down again with some kibble but don't take your hand off of it. Add another handful of food to the dish, and as your dog is eating remain there with your hand on the dish, adding a few pieces of kibble or "high value" treats such as small pieces of cooked chicken or cheese cubes, as she's eating.

So far so good. Now you can release the dish. After she's finished the contents, tell your dog to "sit" as you approach her bowl. When she sits, give her a treat, while reaching down to take the bowl. After a few seconds, give dish back to her, and again add a few morsels of food. Whenever you take something away, try to follow it up with a "trade", a piece of food from your hand that's equally tasty. If that goes well, she gets her dish back. Every now and then, put her dish down empty as though, silly human that you are, you forgot her food. When she looks at you with an "um, you FORGOT something" look then reward her with a handful of something tasty.

This can also be done with non-food items. Start by offering an item to your dog such as a chew toy, but keeping hold of one end not allowing your dog to take it. If she tries to yank it away from you, hold on tight and see if you can pull it away from her. If you're successful in having her drop it, reward her with a trade (food) so she's being rewarded for the correct



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

behavior which, in this case, is dropping the item. If she really put up a fight, put the item away and end the session, she gets nothing for now.

If your dog does show signs of discomfort when you approach him while he has a toy or food, simply take a step back, to the point where he stops growling. You want to find that moment before which he begins to growl, and work from there. From that comfort zone, you can ask for a command, such as a “sit” and if he completes it, toss him a piece of food. If not, you walk away, and he doesn’t get the rest of his breakfast.

Go slow. All too often, owners rush this process. It’s important to keep in mind that every time the dog growls, you’re setting back his progress and you must take a few steps back yourself.

What not to do:

Physically reprimanding a dog who growls when you’ve penetrated their comfort distance around resources will only confirm their fears of you as a threat and escalate their response toward you until they find what works. This can mean that a dog who simply growled initially, may resort to biting if he learns the growling does nothing to ward you off. Take those growls as what they are – warnings, and heed them. Next time around, set up the environment so that the outcome is in your favor. Hand feed your dog breakfast, allowing him several pieces of kibble for every “sit” or “down stay” until he’s finished the entire ration. This way, he learns you’re in control of the resources, but that you’re more than happy to share provided he’s asked for it nicely.

If at any point, your dog snarls and/or growls as you put your hand near his food or other objects, back away and call our free behavior helpline for advice.

Manage the situation.

Take control of the resources. Until you’re able to ascertain what situations and objects elicit your dog’s

guarding response, take precautions when feeding them or giving them objects, and keep in mind who’s around when doing so. Don’t leave objects lying around the house for your dog to find and develop an affinity for. All objects should be ones that you intend to give to your dog. If you know that having certain things, such as rawhides or cell phones, consistently leads them to growl and snap when you approach, then don’t give them rawhides or cell phones. Or if you do, leave your dog and the item in a safe confined area of the house where no one will approach, until he’s eaten or destroyed the entire thing (note, we don’t recommend giving your dog a cell phone). At the very least, you can manage the situation until you get further behavioral help.

Though all dogs undergo possession testing at the shelter, many may not exhibit guarding signs until they’re comfortable in a new home. If your dog shows any signs, please contact our behavior dept. for help. There are different guarding levels amongst dogs with food and toys. Some are not aggressive and will simply hold onto their valuables without relinquishing. Others will become aggressive. Here are some signs to look for:

- Dog quickens his eating, or turns his head and avoids your hand or he moves the food or toy further away or to another room. These are mild possession signs.
- Dog plunges his face into his bowl, or stiffens and with a hard stare (lots of white around the eyes) pushes the bowl away from your hand when you reach for it.
- He stares at you intently while quickly eating, or grabs a toy without letting you have it. You may have in the past forced him to let it go.
- Dog protects food or toys within a radius of several feet, sometimes simply being in the same room is all it takes for them to begin snapping and growling. This is extreme possession.

Please call our behavior helpline for suggestions and referrals

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.