

## Resource Guarding

Our ancestral wild dogs had to hunt for their food and protecting those precious resources was a sensible matter of survival. But resource guarding becomes a problem when it manifests in a pet dog that lives with humans. Also called “possessiveness,” a dog displays protective behaviours toward an item they consider valuable and aggression to the person (or other animal) they perceive is trying to take it away. Frequently seen with food and toys, resource guarding can also extend to furniture, socks, beds -- basically, anything the dog greatly prizes.



### What does resource guarding look like?

The following body language/behaviour may be exhibited by a dog with a valued item when a person or other animal approaches, attempts to touch it, or remove it:

- Slows down or stops while eating; speeds up while eating, sometimes jabbing at, or “muzzle-punching,” the bowl
- Hovers or postures over the item, often with a slightly lowered head
- Shields the item with their body or hugs it close to them
- Picks up the item and moves away
- Shows a sudden stillness, stiffening or tension of the body
- Whale eye, hard gaze
- Pinned or “airplane” ears
- Growls, lip lifts
- Snarls, lunges, bites

### Why do dogs guard resources?

It's not fully understood, but is likely a combination of nature and nurture. There may be a genetic component at work in some dogs. It's also plausible that some dogs have learned to become defensive about losing resources, and that displaying certain behaviours decreases the chances of that happening.

### How to manage resource guarding

First, have compassion for your dog's condition. They are not behaving out of spite or anger, but a visceral fear of losing something important to them. Managing resource guarding is all about anticipation and prevention. Try to identify what items trigger your dog's resource guarding. For example, they might only guard food, but not toys; or their possessiveness may extend to a wide range of items. Some resources commonly guarded by dogs include:

- Food in bowl; longer-lasting treats, such as rawhides or meat bones
- Toys -- all toys, or certain types, such as squeakies or plush
- Furniture, such as the sofa or your bed
- Garbage, extracted from the waste bin or found on the street
- Carrion -- dead birds, rodents
- Random other objects -- dirty socks, plastic water bottles, poop -- remember, the dog decides what is theirs!



Also consider context, as it may help to prevent situations where a dog feels the need to resource guard. Does the dog protect valued items under any circumstance, or when additional stressors are at play? For example, maybe they are okay with one person being near their food bowl at mealtime, but not when several are crowding the space. Maybe they are comfortable exchanging toys with a calm adult but display aggression if rambunctious children are too close. Maybe they can happily share the sofa with their owner, but they snap when a second person joins them. Context is key in understanding resource guarding.

Simple ways to safely manage resource guarding:

- Feed the dog in a separate room away from humans and other animals (avoid using food prep rooms such as the kitchen). Leave them alone while they eat. When the dog is finished and well away from the bowl, remove it.
- If the dog is playing with a toy or eating a rawhide, leave them alone. If necessary, do not allow the dog these items, especially if children are in the home.
- If the dog guards sofas, armchairs or your bed, don't allow access to them. Shut the door to all bedrooms and block your chairs with other furniture, if need be.
- Be proactive about "cleaning up" -- make sure that toys aren't left lying around, waste bins are secured inside cupboards, and that random objects, such as socks, shoes, and TV remotes, are put away.
- Practise vigilance and avoidance on every outing. Be on the lookout for items the dog might potentially guard and calmly move the dog away from them. Should they succeed in picking up an item, always carry high-value treats to entice them to drop it. If the dog is persistent in picking up items and not relinquishing them, consider using a muzzle on walks (see THS's Muzzle Training Behaviour Modification info sheet).
- If confronted with resource guarding behaviour in any circumstance, do not take the item from the dog. Do not correct or punish the dog. Stay calm and be non-judgmental as you assess the situation.

### **Can you modify resource guarding?**

Yes, but we highly recommend you do so with the help of a certified trainer. Modification is about working toward transforming behaviour in a safe, supportive way. In the case of resource guarding, it primarily involves counter-conditioning, or changing the dog's emotional response to a negative association -- in this case, a human or other animal being near the resources they value and fear losing. Resource guarding can be greatly improved by following the recommendations and behaviour modification plan of a trained professional.

