

Resource guarding is a general term used to describe a set of behaviors (generally aggressive) that a dog displays when he or she is attempting to retain control of something of value. These items of value are not always tangible items, as the dog may guard prime sleeping/resting spots, the area near his or her owner, doorways, etc. Dogs can guard against humans and against other dogs and these do not always overlap. That means that your dog may growl when another dog approaches him or her while he has a chewbone, but he or she would be fine with you approaching. Resource guarding is generally pretty specific (i.e. he predictably guards certain items), but it can generalize to other items when the dog discovers how well it works. The term “guard” just means that the dog is fearful that the item will be taken away and he or she is doing his best to retain control of it. If a dog *resource guards* his or her owner this does not mean that the dog is being protective against a real threat. It is similar to the way the dog would guard his bone (i.e. “It’s mine and you can’t have it.”)

Use these tips for food and toy guarding against humans.

1. Do not let the dog practice the behavior! Any behavior that gets practiced is likely to become a habit. This means that you should set up the environment so that guarding behavior does not occur. How you go about this will depend on what the dog is guarding and what your specific situation is. This might mean refraining from giving the dog high value items (like pig ears, rawhides, etc) or it might mean the dog is fed in the kennel so he is not disturbed, not letting him on the couch (if he guards it), etc. Do not set the dog up to fail by provoking a guarding response so you can “correct him”. This will only result in heightening his anxiety over the resource.
2. With items that the dog does not value, practice the “drop it” command. This is taught in PetSmart courses using food as a trade. The benefit of this is that the dog learns that relinquishing things to you is a good thing. Do not chase or corner the dog if he has something (if it can be avoided) as this is more likely to provoke a guarding response.
3. To prevent guarding from being a problem (or for early signs of guarding), you can condition your approach to mean something pleasant to the dog. To do this you would approach him while he has something of value and *before he gets anxious* toss him a delicious treat and walk away. This begins to teach the dog that your approach means good things for him. You will gradually be able to get closer and closer to the dog while he has something of value. The important part of this exercise is that you reward him or her BEFORE you see signs of guarding. Often the first sign of guarding is that the dog eats faster (or tries to swallow the item) or that he freezes over the item and stops eating/chewing. If the early sign of guarding occurs when you are 10 feet away, that means you need to toss the delicious treat from 11 feet away. Do everything in your power to not let the guarding behavior be practiced.
4. Resource guarding specific items against humans has a very good prognosis, provided you get the appropriate help. The problem becomes harder to deal with if there are children involved, unpredictable triggers, guarding numerous items against other household dogs in which a bite occurred, and the inability or unwillingness to systematically desensitize the dog to your approach.
5. Ask your trainer for a recommendation, but steer clear of any “professional” that suggests physical punishment as a solution to resource guarding. Remember, inappropriate punishment creates anxiety and the dog has already shown he is anxious about retaining control of his “possession”. We don’t want to add to that anxiety.