

Greta's Gym
Resource Guarding Information

It is a huge mistake to label a dog with a resource guarding problem as "dominant". This is largely because it is just too simplistic to think that everything a dog might do which his owners disapprove of is some kind of a bid for power, especially if it involves threat behavior. This label can also encourage owners to look for opportunities to score points back on their dog when their time would be much better spent looking for opportunities to teach the dog not to guard his possessions and to reward him for doing other things.

Here are a few of the myths about resource guarding, according to Jean Donaldson's book "Mine! A Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs".

- Myth #1: Resource guarding is abnormal behavior.**
- Myth #2: Because resource guarding is driven largely by genetics, it can't be changed.**
- Myth #3: Resource guarding can be cured by making a dog realize that resources are abundant.**
- Myth #4: Resource guarding is a symptom of "dominance" or "pushiness".**
- Myth #5: Resource guarding is a result of "spoiling" a dog.**

So, if the answer is not to "dominate" your dog or shower it with freely available food, then what is it? Simple. **Make your puppy or dog understand that the approach of a human to his food, toys, space, etc is a GOOD THING.** This process is called classical conditioning. Just as the clicker is associated with treats in your dog's mind, the approach of a human hand, face, or other body part to his food dish, toys, space, etc should mean better food is on its way.

The following process should be done with ALL dogs, for their entire lives. Definitely do it with young puppies. The only part that changes is how often you do these exercises, what sorts of things your dog has when you approach, and how close you can get to the dog before presenting it with the treat. Every capable member of the family should take part in these exercises, keeping safety firmly in mind.

Initiate the "Say Please Protocol" with your dog. There are two reasons to do this. One is to inform your dog that you and your family are the source of **All Good Things**, and only by being polite does your dog get them from you. The second reason is for all family members to practice training with your dog, so that he listens to everyone in the family. If certain family members are being "guarded against" (growled or lunged at), then those people are the ones who should be asking the dog to "Say Please" more often.

Teach your dog the cue to “Give”. Start with objects that he does not value as much and treats that are highly valued. Then gradually work your way up to objects that he cares very much about. Ask for him to give the object, then either wait for him to do so (if he knows the cue) or cause him to do so by presenting the treat near his mouth. Reward and praise him for dropping the object, then give it back to him as soon as he’s done chewing the treat. Practicing this cue, giving the resource back each time, helps the dog understand that giving away his resources to a human is a good thing, so there is no reason to guard them. Children should only work on this step under close adult supervision. Start with family members that the dog trusts most (growls at least).

Condition your dog to expect good things when you approach him, especially if he has some sort of highly prized resource like a bone. As with “give”, start with something your dog does not guard. Walk over, present the treat while he’s enjoying his low value toy or food, and leave. Do this with several low value toys throughout the day. Repeat this for several days until he begins to look up at you, with a “hey, she’s here to give me a treat” expression” on his face. With the low value objects, move up to touching the dog in some way, grabbing the object (often saying “give” first), then popping a high value treat in his mouth and returning the object. Over a period of weeks or more, gradually move up to repeating the above with higher and higher value toys or food. With high value toys/food/bones, start by just waling by the dog, out of the range that makes him growl, and dropping a treat. Move closer as the days go by, if the dog is ready; never progress faster than your dog is happily willing to go. If the dog is not relaxed and happy at any stage, you have moved too fast. Retreat to the previous level. Repeat this entire process with several high value objects. After that, progress to doing this process with more people around, more stress in the environment. Children should only work on the conditioning step under close adult supervision.

Keep your dog from exhibiting resource guarding behavior by not moving past his acceptance level. If he growls when you get within three feet of his toy, then don’t make him growl—stay more than three feet away from his toy next time. Better yet, remove the toys that he guards from the living area, so that he can’t accidentally be triggered. If your dog guards his dinner, make sure no one approaches or give him his dinner in a separate room, for now. If your dog guards the couch, try to keep him off of it by not inviting him up and/or by make it uncomfortable to lay on (an upside-down carpet protector works well for that). Any approaches that you make to your dog at this time while he has a resource should be on purpose and accompanied by a treat. **DO NOT PUNISH** him for growling by scruff shaking or any other show of violence or aggression. All you will be doing is proving to your dog that he was right—humans are crazy and you’ve got to protect yourself from them!

Maintenance. After your dog is happily accepting any human approach to his food or toys (a state that humans call “normal” and dogs call “strange”), you are at the maintenance stage. Twice a week, at first, then once or twice per month, approach him while he is eating, pick up the bowl, and prop in a handful of treats before setting it back down. Do the same with toys or bones as well. Occasionally practice the give cue, replacing the surrendered object with something else if you really must take it away.

Finally, continue the **“SAY PLEASE”** protocol for the rest of the dog’s life, incorporating new tricks as your dog learns them.

Oh no, he’s doing it again! If your dog ever starts up again with resource guarding, it’s not because he is trying to take over the world. It’s probably because you haven’t kept up on his training and he has started to notice that it’s not such a good idea to give up his resources, after all. Remind him that humans are the source of all good things by going through the above process again.