



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

# Resource Guarding

### What is resource guarding?

Resource guarding is a dog training term for protecting your valuables. Valuables for dogs commonly include food, attention, resting spots and generally anything valuable from the dog's point of view. Most commonly it is food, particularly 'high value' food such as bones or chews, which is what this info sheet will focus on.

### Resource Guarding is a natural, normal canine behaviour

As humans, we guard our resources too! We protect our valuables, our family and even our ideas! Companies hire security guards and banks use vaults. The list goes on.

First of all it is important to establish why this behaviour is occurring. Resource guarding can have its origins in a number of causes including hunger, fear of competition or loss of possession and anxiety/insecurity. Your dog is NOT displaying this behaviour because he/she wants to be dominant over you! This behaviour can often start developing while puppies are still with their littermates.

**Resource guarding does not fix itself with time; it gets more severe with practice. It needs timely intervention.**

### What does resource guarding look like?

Most canines practice some form of resource guarding, and there are a number of different levels of resource guarding ranging from very mild to severe. For example:

- Giving a 'concerned look' to the dog/person that is considered a threat
- Eating faster - some dogs will eat a little bit faster and more intensely if they feel threatened. If all the food is eaten up, it can't be stolen can it?
- Positioning themselves between their object and the 'threat'. For example a dog may move around his bowl so that he can 'protect' it better.
- Giving a canine "dirty look" - the dog will stop eating and usually freeze, head lowered over the object, eyes wide -possibly showing the whites, body still, face very tight, lips can be puckered. Seriously, don't come any closer!
- "I really mean it" - there may be growling, snarling and snapping directed at the threat.





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### Prevention

Avoid giving your dog an opportunity to practice the aggressive behaviour, as it will only make the behaviour worse over time. Feed your dog on its own, preferably in a quiet area. This should reduce the stress and/or the fear of competition.

### Don't pester or punish

Just because you would like to be able to take things from your dog (as this is important if they have something dangerous), it doesn't mean you should make it a point to repeatedly bother your dog while they are eating, or take things from them just because you can. One of the worst things you can do is deliberately challenge and steal from your dog because you feel 'you should be able to'. This can annoy even the nicest dog into becoming ready for the next challenge and make matters much worse, or even create a problem where there really wasn't one.

If your dog is eating from a bowl/food toy or eating a chew or bone, wait until they have finished eating and then remove the bowl. Do not purposely take food away or punish a dog who resource guards: this only heightens stress and anxiety and serves no positive purpose.

Caution: some dogs guard the area where they have eaten, even when all the food is gone, particularly in the case of a high value item such as a raw bone.

In this case, encourage your dog to come away from the area and reward them highly with a treat. Perhaps vary the areas that you offer the high value bone in.

### Modifying resource guarding - don't rush it

Hand feeding and food bowl exercises - to be done by all family members (children to be supervised)

1. Start hand feeding your dog. This needs to be done for a few weeks depending on how long the behaviour has been displayed. This way, your dog will associate you with being in charge of what, when and how much he/she is eating and develop a great association with your hands. It's an important step!
2. Then repeat letting your dog eat out of the bowl in your hands.
3. Repeat this whilst putting the bowl on the ground but still holding it. Stop and remove yourself at any time your dog growls, bares teeth or acts threatening in any way.
4. While your dog is eating out of the bowl walk past the food bowl and add a few very tasty treats (such as roast chicken). Do this from a distance your dog is comfortable with. This will teach your dog that a person approaching the bowl is a good thing as they are adding something good and not taking something away.
5. As your dog gets more comfortable with this, move your hand closer to the bowl and keep adding high value treats to the bowl with your hand as your dog finishes the food. This will teach them that a hand approaching their bowl isn't bad.

### Trade/Swap games

6. Once your dog is accepting your presence while eating dry/low value food, you can start concentrating on high value treats such as rawhide chews and bones. Offer your dog a



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rawhide chew but do not let go of it. Hold onto it while your dog chews on it giving it only at the very end to eat up (the time to the end could vary). You want your dog to think that this treat is yours and you are nice enough to share it with your dog.

7. Exchange the rawhide treat with something much tastier i.e. bone (chicken wing, chicken neck, marrow bone etc). This will teach your dog that you are not taking away food but you are giving something much better instead. Add in a verbal cue such as “thankyou”, or “give”.

Use the same approach if the resource is not a food item but a toy. Use another toy of high value to do the trade/swap games.

### Resource guarding between dogs

If the aggression is directed towards other dogs, we recommend feeding the dogs in areas where they are physically separate from each other, such as one dog inside, the other out, so that there is no opportunity to guard food. This might include preventing the dogs from seeing each other through a glass door or window. Then, work gradually through the following exercises:

- Reward the dog for relaxed behaviour around the other animals, when no food is present.
- Then, set up an exercise with both dogs sitting at a distance from each other, such as at the other side of a room or patio away. You will need both dogs on a lead (or tethered) to start with. Start sharing treats with both dogs, giving a treat to each dog one by one. Then when the food is finished, the dogs can be free.
- Gradually reduce the distance between the dogs so eventually they can sit in front of you sharing handfed treats.
- Each dog will learn that the presence of the other dog means good things happen. They also learn to be polite and patient around the other dog/s.

Remember, prevention is very important. Always use careful management and don't allow the dogs to have high value treats together, even supervised. Use crates, tethers and separate areas for prevention and management. For more info refer to our info sheet: Managing multi dog households.

### Finally

Be mindful that if a dog has successfully practiced resource guarding food previously the dog might start resource guarding other items of value. Resource guarding in dogs can be a serious issue! Thank you for taking the time to read about it and begin to take the steps to prevent and/or modify it.





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### References and further reading

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