

Possessive of toys and food

It is quite normal for dogs to be protective over things they see as a valued resource, such as food, bones and other people. Often, this is the result of a previous experience which dictates to the dog that, if a person or other animal approaches it when it has these resources, they will be taken away. Naturally, the dog may become uneasy, as it does not want to lose this valued resource.

As pet owners, we also only tend to think about resource guarding if a dog growls or tries to bite us when we approach it near food. Even then, our simple solution is not to approach the dog when it is eating. As always, prevention is better than a cure. A dog doesn't even have to show resource guarding behaviours to benefit from the training. Ensuring that you spend some time teaching a puppy, or adult dog, the benefits of 'sharing' will provide you with a trustworthy and well-adjusted family pet. Short periods of training with any new dog or puppy before it even demonstrates guarding behaviour, will leave you with confidence at being able to interact with your dog(s) when they have a possession they would rather keep to themselves!

Possessive and protective behaviours usually stem from insecurity, and therefore, building up some trust and confidence in the dog, particularly around food or a valued item, will go far. We want to teach the dogs that having people around their valued possessions is nothing but 'good news' and is something to desire! No matter the age of your dog, we will be able to teach it to happily share its worldly possessions. However, as always, it is important that you carry out this training in a safe manner. If in doubt, or unsure, it is best to contact a behavioural trainer to assist you with the training process.

Sit = 'please'

Manners are always a great place to start. As with a lot of dog training, a 'sit' is a way for our dog to ask permission for something. Usually, we ask our dogs to sit before something 'good' happens, such as a walk, coming inside or going outside, or perhaps even playing a game. This should also be the case at meal times. Teach your dog to 'sit' as a way of saying 'please may I have my dinner?'

To start improving your dog's food-bowl manners, first measure your dog's food into a separate bowl and place it out of reach, say on the kitchen bench for example. Ask your dog to sit, and place its empty dinner bowl onto the ground. Without a doubt, your dog will look at you with confusion written on its face, wondering where its dinner is! This is a positive step in the right direction. Rather than wanting us to 'get away' from its dinner bowl, the dog is instead inviting us over. Next, place a few pieces of kibble in the bowl. Once again, the dog will look up, perplexed and wondering if more is to come. Repeat this for the remainder of its dinner, varying how much food you are placing into the bowl, but be careful to only put handfuls in at a time. Already, the dog's perception of someone approaching its food bowl has changed – it is now asking us to come over to its dinner bowl to fill it with food!

The food bowl

When we feed our dog from a bowl, we usually place the food down and then walk away. Sometimes, the only interaction that we have with our dog when it is eating is to take something desirable from it! A dog that consistently eats alone is more likely to resent intrusions to its meals at a later date.

This time we are going to place about $\frac{3}{4}$ of your dog's meal into its normal dinner bowl. In a separate bowl, place aside the equivalent of $\frac{1}{4}$ of your dog's meal in the form of something really tasty, such as roast chicken or raw meat. Ask the dog to sit and place the food bowl down so it can eat. As the dog begins to eat its food, approach it and throw some chicken, or desired treat, into the food bowl and then

move away again. The key is that we keep approaching and then backing away so that the dog learns that the approach of someone while they are eating can only mean good things, as food is always dispensed into their bowl. The level at which you approach your dog will depend on how comfortable it is with your approach. Ideally, what we

are looking for is a dog that will wag its tail furiously as we approach with our treats, or a dog that stops eating and looks up at the approaching person to receive its treat (make sure you always place it in the bowl).

The steps that may be taken for this training technique are listed below. Before you move onto the next step, make sure that your dog is comfortable and happy or relaxed with the previous step. Remember that moving through these steps at a slow pace is often more beneficial for the dog:

- Approach bowl, toss in food, walk away
- Approach bowl, toss in food, wait a few seconds walk away
- Approach bowl, bend down, toss in food, walk away
- Approach bowl, pat back of dog, toss in food, walk away
- Approach bowl, bend down, tap bowl, toss in food, walk away
- Approach bowl, bend down, move bowl around, toss in food, walk away
- Approach bowl, bend down, pick up bowl, add tasty treats, give bowl back to dog

Remember that this is an excellent preventative to resource guarding. However, if at any stage you are uncomfortable, it is always best to seek professional assistance. These training techniques are all about making the dog feel more comfortable, not about pushing the boundaries.

It's no different for bones

So what if the issue is with bones? The food bowl is still a good place to start, as it is of lower 'value' than the bones, therefore giving you a better chance at succeeding. Once your dog is loving people coming over to its dinner bowl, you should then repeat the process with something more valuable such as a pig's ear, and then later with raw bones. The most important thing to remember is to move at your dog's pace. Remember that we are not here to push the dog to growl or show aggression. This training is merely to make the dog feel more comfortable about people approaching it when it has a prized possession, whatever that may be!

Deliver food in a variety of ways

If your dog is showing any form of food aggression, the best thing to do is to start delivering the food in different ways, such as in a variety of Kongs, treatballs, scattering food around the back yard or even feeding its dinner in different places each night. This is particularly important if your dog is starting to guard a particular area either from other people or other dogs. Varying the delivery of their meals can drastically reduce your dog's guarding behaviour.

A word on toys

Address the guarding of toys in the same way as with food, but rather than dropping some food into the dinner bowl, you would instead trade the toy for a piece of chicken or another toy. The game of 'catch me if you can' becomes fun for the dog when we show interest in the item. Whereas if we lose interest in the possession and act like what we have in our hands (food or another toy) is the most exciting thing in the world, as well as trading the treasured item for a tasty morsel of food, it will decrease the value of what the dog already has in its mouth. The dog will also be less likely to run away and chew the item, but rather than dropping some food into the dinner bowl, you would instead trade the toy for a piece of chicken or another toy. The game of 'catch me if you can' becomes fun for the dog when we show interest in the item. Whereas if we lose interest in the possession and act like what we have in our hands (food or another toy) is the most exciting thing in the world, as well as trading the treasured item for a tasty morsel of food, it will decrease the value of what the dog already has in its mouth. The dog will also be less likely to run away and chew the item, but rather bring it to you for a 'trade'.

What if there is more than one dog?

Dealing with resource guarding between dogs is a little more difficult. The key is to keep them separated at all times when you cannot supervise them around food. However, dealing with this in a similar way as with people, is a great

way to teach the dogs to share. By saying their names and giving the respective dog a treat, you are teaching the dogs that 'good things' happen when the other dog is around. The aim of this training is to teach all dogs that 'good things' happen when other dogs are around them with food. Your way of approaching this will depend on the types of dogs you own and the behaviours demonstrated. If you are dealing with food aggression between dogs, professional help is always recommended.

As with any behaviour, prevention is always better than a cure. These exercises are an excellent way of preventing or dealing with mild resource guarding behaviours. If you are concerned about the behaviours your dog is demonstrating, it is always best to seek professional assistance.

Source: RSPCA Victoria - Possessive food & toys