

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Resource Guarding

What is resource guarding?

Resource guarding is a natural behavior for dogs. However, it can be problematic in a human home. Behaviors like tensing over a toy or food bowl, standing or hunching over the items, freezing, growling, hard barking, snapping etc. when you approach a dog who is in possession of a resource can all indicate that they are resource guarding. The goal is to keep people or other dogs away from a resource that the dog sees as valuable. This can be your dog's food or treats, toys, or really anything else that they see as high value including people. When we think about guarding behavior from the point of view of a dog, it is a natural desire to keep those valuable resources safe, but it can present serious problems in the home if it is not handled correctly. Each dog decides for themselves what items they find valuable. Any dog can guard any item.

What does resource guarding look like?

Some dogs will guard their food or toys when they have them in their possession, while others may guard these items even if they are just in the dog's general vicinity, while other dogs may guard a space (like a sofa or a room). This guarding can present as guarding these items or spaces from humans or from other dogs, and in some cases both.

Guarding behavior will also look different for different dogs. Some dogs will simply take the item and run away, while others may growl, snap, or even escalate to biting. Most dogs will offer a warning first before escalating and it is extremely important to respect these warnings and to never punish your dog for warnings, and also be aware of more subtle guarding behaviors such as freezing. By punishing these warnings your dog may stop offering warnings and immediately escalate to more severe behaviors like biting. Warning behaviors are good!

What can I do?

If your dog is showing guarding behavior towards you, the best thing to do is simply leave your dog alone when they are eating or when they are in possession of any item that they perceive as high value. Similarly if your dog is showing guarding behavior towards another pet in the home, the best thing to do is to separate the pets when they are eating or being offered toys or other high value items.

If you are concerned about the level of resource guarding your pet is showing, for example if they are growling or barking when you just walk by them, the safest option is to reach out to a qualified, positive reinforcement trainer or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist.

Alternatively, if you are looking to work with your dog on their resource guarding, you can follow the steps below. Please remember to take your time and keep your dog under their threshold to avoid inadvertently making the behavior worse.

Step 1: Find a food item that your dog prefers to the resource they are guarding, whether that is food or toys. This may require some trial and error but some good places to start are with hot dogs and cheese! Any meat or meaty treats with strong smells tend to be preferable but every dog is an individual.

Step 2: Give your dog the item they guard (food, toys etc.) and leave the room. When you re-enter the room, remain by the door (or a safe distance away that will not trigger the guarding behavior) and toss the high value treat towards them. Aim to get the treat as close to them as possible, and don't be afraid to toss multiple treats if you miss the first few times. Once your dog has consumed the treats, exit the room and repeat this step once again.

Step 3: After several sessions at the distance you start at, take a step closer. If taking this step closer triggers your dog's guarding (this includes your dog freezing), move back to the original distance and work there for more sessions until you are able to take that step closer without reaction. Repeat Step 2 again when you are that 1 step closer.

Step 4: Work on each "1 step closer" distance for several sessions. On each session, start just a half step behind where you ended the previous session to allow your dog a little extra distance to keep them under threshold. Keeping your dog under threshold is one of the most important things to remember! Keep moving closer and closer slowly, session by session, and as your dog begins to learn that your approach means high value treats appear. Your dog should learn to welcome your presence, even when they are in possession of their resources!

With steady work and perseverance these steps can do wonders to reduce or extinguish the guarding behavior. With any cue or training, it is best to reinforce the new, desirable behavior (in this case not guarding their resources) by occasionally rewarding them. In this case, every now and again if you walk by your dog when they have their resource in their possession, walk by and drop their high value treat to help them remember that approach means good things!

It is important to be aware that approach is different from reaching down to retrieve the item, and that this will require similar counter conditioning steps. This should be particularly slow, and you should never attempt to remove anything from your dogs' mouth, whether they resource guard or not.

What not to do!

We caution against the use of aversive tools or trainers who describe themselves as aversive, balanced, or mixed-method. Aversive tools include things like shock collars, prong collars, and choke chains – tools that teach through fear, pain, and intimidation. Aversive techniques do not change a dog's emotional response to stimuli; rather, they shut down behaviors. These approaches also often punish the warning so escalation becomes "sudden" and more severe. Shock collars (sometimes describes as "vibration" collars) are sometimes thought of as quick-fixes but they create long-term tragedies by teaching avoidance and immobility, also known as learned helplessness.

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>