

PREVENTING RESOURCE GUARDING

All dogs undergo a behavior evaluation when they arrive at our Adoption Center. This evaluation is designed to identify a dog's potential for aggression in ordinary living situations, such as your home. Say you have a dog who shows possessiveness — also known as *resource guarding* — around their food bowl, a chew or a toy. Dogs who guard resources get stressed or act threateningly when they perceive that someone is trying to take away their food, chew or toy. Resource guarding is a common behavior in dogs because it's natural for them to protect what's theirs. However, it's good to teach these dogs that guarding around us isn't necessary — for your safety and the dog's comfort.

Signs of Guarding

When you approach the dog, take note if you see the dog do any of these things:

- Eats faster
- Growls
- Stops eating or freezes up
- Snaps in the air
- Lifts lips to show teeth
- Bites

Recommendations to Adopters

We recommend the following exercises to give your dog regular reminders that when people are around their food, chew or toys, good things happen — like added tasty treats or trading for something even better. By working with your dog and using a safe and positive reward-based step-by-step approach, you can help your dog to feel comfortable and relaxed about people approaching or taking away valued resources.

We ask that you make the checked exercises below a part of your routine with your dog. For the first couple of weeks home, plan on doing them daily. After that, you can do them less often, like once a week or every other week. Have all adult family members do them at different times. Supervise older children to conduct these exercises only after the dog has successfully practiced them with adults.

Food Guarding

- **Hand feeding:** In a nutshell, you feed the normal amount of food, one small handful at a time, with a "sit" required before each handful. Put your dog's dinner in a baggie or trainer's pouch that you hold in your lap or have placed out of the dogs reach. Sit in a chair next to your dog and place an empty food bowl on the floor next to you. Ask your dog to sit, and when they do, drop a handful of kibble in the bowl.

When they're done eating, repeat. Keep this up until your dog's entire meal portion is gone.

- **Variation:** Move on to this variation only after you've hand-fed most meals a few bites at a time for a week. Pick up the empty food bowl after each sit, drop in a handful of food, then place the bowl back on the floor. Once you and your dog are comfortable with this routine, and your dog is showing no signs of stress or guarding, progress to the next exercise.
- **Adding Bonuses:** Ask for a sit, then give your dog their meal in their bowl. Toss in two or three treats while they eat. Don't put your hand in the bowl — just toss or drop the treats in. Treats could be diced dog sausage like Natural Balance, diced chicken, cheese or your dinner leftovers.
 - **Variation #1:** Approach your dog's bowl from several feet away while they're eating and drop a couple of treats in the bowl. (These treats should be tastier than what your dog is eating.) Approach from different angles and at different points during the meal. Be sure to hide the bonus treats in a pocket, a pouch or behind your back so your dog doesn't see it beforehand.
 - **Variation #2:** If your dog is completely comfortable as you do Variation #1, with no signs of stress or aggression, touch the bowl as you add the treats.

Chew Guarding

The best way to counter chew guarding is to teach your dog trades: If they drop something that they currently have, they'll get another more desirable one. Here are the steps:

- Place some treats that your dog loves in your pocket. First, give your dog a mildly interesting chew — an unflavored Nylabone, a Greenie dental chew, etc.
- When your dog has the chew in their mouth, command them to drop it, then toss several of the tastier treats in your pocket about a foot away from their nose. Leave the chew right where it is and allow your dog to return to it on their own. Repeat.
- When your dog is readily moving away from their chew for even better treats, quickly pick up the chew when they are engaged with the treats. Put the chew behind your back while you praise your dog and toss them a few more treats.
- If they don't give up the chew easily, don't take it but don't let them ignore you either. If necessary, drop even more treats on the ground or switch to tastier treats until your dog is tempted enough to drop the chew and eat the treats.
- When they're done with the treats, ask your dog to sit, then give back the chew when they obey. You want your dog to learn that you always have something better and to can trust you.
- Once your dog is successful with only the mildly interesting chew, practice drop it with chews that they like more. Do this until they'll give up even their favorite chew.

Toy Guarding

Countering toy guarding is almost identical to countering chew guarding. The only difference, of course, is that you're using toys. However, there's a fun variation which we've outlined below: the bait & switch game. Play this with two of the same kind of toy like two tennis balls or two plush toys.

- Show your dog one of the toys, then throw it and encourage them to fetch.
- When your dog picks the toy up, call them and show them the other toy, then act as though you're going to throw it in the opposite direction. They'll probably drop the first toy and come running to chase after the second one. While they're chasing that one, go pick up the first toy and repeat the sequence.
- The next step is to call your when they've picked up the first toy, but don't show them the second one right away. With any luck, they'll turn and run back to you while still holding the first toy in their mouth. When they gets close to you, command them to drop the first toy, then show them the second toy. They should drop the first toy to chase after the second one.

Need Help?

If your dog shows any of the above signs when you practice these exercises, or if you have further questions, please call our Dog Team at 360-213-2627 and ask for our Canine Enrichment Specialist or Dog Team Lead.