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# What to do About Dogs That Protect Resources

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Dogs that bare their teeth, growl, snap, or bite to defend things that belong to them are expressing a natural dog behavior that can be problematic or dangerous if not dealt with properly. These dogs are not mean and do not hate you. They may have even experienced deprivation of some things in their life and now feel that they must protect things that they enjoy to keep them from going away.

Most dogs that display these behaviors over things such as toys, beds, food, or even people will need to be taught how to overcome their responses and learn a new, more appropriate communication. Some dogs may only respond this way towards other dogs instead of people. Since this is normal dog communication if the other dog does not respond respectfully or if the protective dog takes it too far then a different kind of training will need to take place. In many cases, managing the dog's environment is the safest and easiest route to resolution.

Any item that your dog has stolen, or forbidden items such as trash or items that you have historically tried to chase him to get back, automatically have a higher value to the dog. They have learned that they need to protect these items more fiercely than other items so follow the steps below to teach him better skills.

## Guarding toys

- If your dog has decided that he is going to guard toys, instead of forcibly removing the toy, teach him to willingly give you the toy.
- Anytime you engage in play with your dog you can use 2 toys of a similar value. You can play fetch and tug with your dog but instead of taking the item that he has in his mouth, use the other item to trade him with.
- If you are playing fetch, wait for your dog to come closer to you and then throw the other toy. When your dog drops the first toy, you can retrieve it and repeat the process.
- By doing this your dog will learn that he doesn't have to play keep away from you and bringing the item towards you results in him getting to continue the game. When done consistently, your dog will start to bring his toy closer and even drop it out of his mouth for you.



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- If your dog is reluctant to let go of one toy for the other you can try trading him for a toy that he likes better or a bit of food. Wave the toy or food near the dog and entice him with it.
- If your dog doesn't give up the item and you can let him have it, then give up the effort to get it back this time and just leave the dog. If they want to be near you, this sort of abandonment can be just enough for the dog to say "Hey, come back. I'll share."
- If it is an item that requires you to get it back because it may be dangerous to the dog then keep trying more enticing bits of food. You may even need to go to the fridge and get something yummy out of there as a really special surprise.
- You can manage your dog's behavior by not allowing him to have access to the items that he guards without direct supervision.
- If your dog likes to steal trash, put your trash can behind a door that he can't get through, if your dog steals your personal items, put them away where he can't get to them.
- If he guards toys, keep only a few of the lower value toys out that he is less likely to guard such as rope toys or ball toys. You may need to remove toys completely especially if there are small children around or guests but in those cases, you may choose to instead remove the dog from the situation rather than asking him to not guard items and be faced with dealing with new people or children.

### **Guarding beds or resting spots**

- If your dog guards his resting spots such as beds, the couch, or your own bed, you will need to establish some consistency in his routine and your expectations.
- For dogs that guard surfaces like your furniture, you may need to place a leash on them so you can remove him in the safest way possible if he is immune to your requests.
- Similar to trading for toys, if your dog is in a place that you don't want him to be, ask him to move away from that location by enticing him with a toy game or food.
- Most dogs will willingly give up a resting spot for a yummy treat. If your dog is reluctant to move from his coveted spot for a dog treat try something extra special from the refrigerator such as a hot dog or a small piece of cheese.
- For dogs that are receiving regular training it may be a good idea to keep cut up boiled chicken breast in your fridge for these specific occasions. What this will teach your dog is that when you call him away from his resting area you will give him something great in return so it is beneficial for him to come to you when you call him.



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- If you have tried all sorts of yummy treats and trying to entice your dog into a game of playing with toys and he still won't budge, think about if you can leave him there for now and when he does get up, give him lots of praise and rewards.
- If you absolutely cannot get him to get up and you need him to move then use the attached leash to gently direct him off of the spot. Be sure to heavily praise him and even give a treat when he finally does move. Remember, you are teaching your dog to willingly give up items he wants to covet which can be really hard for him to do.
- If you do not want your dog to guard your furniture, be sure to set up some sort of barrier in between your dog and those locations. Provide your dog comfortable bedding near these locations so he has a more suitable alternative.
- If you have provided a bed to your dog and they don't use it, consider moving it to a location that they like to spend time in.

### **Guarding food**

- For dogs that guard their food or valuable chew bones it is easiest to keep them separated from others while they are eating. This could mean placing your dog in a crate or in a room away from other pets or people.
- If your dog is the only pet and you are able to reliably keep people away from the food bowl then you should allow your dog to dine alone. As soon as your dog has finished their meal, pick up the food bowl so that there isn't any guarding of the empty food bowl.
- You should not allow a dog that guards food to have unrestricted access to food at all times but instead feed on a schedule of at least 2 times per day.
- You should never put your hand in the dog's food bowl or take the food bowl away from a dog that is expressing the guarding behaviors.
- You can, however, feed the dog their meal from your hand a small handful or a single piece at a time. It may not be safe to use this method with all dogs but if it is safe with your dog then it could be a good bonding experience with your dog. It may sound like a lot of work but realistically, most dogs can be hand fed their entire meal in about 15 minutes.
- For more advanced training of food bowl guarding refer to expert dog trainer, Jean Donaldson, book *Mine! A Practical Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs* (2002) or find a professional dog trainer that is skilled in working with aggression in dogs.



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## **Guarding people**

- If your dog behaves aggressively when they are near you and people approach, your dog could be telling people that they are not comfortable when people approach you when they are near you.
- It may not be that they are protecting you but instead protecting themselves. If your dog behaves this way only when he is on leash, your dog would probably benefit from learning better skills on leash.
- If this is not a behavior that you want to encourage, if your dog behaves this way you will need to move away from your dog at any sign that he might start his guarding behavior or move your dog away from the approaching person.
- This could include becoming still or stiffening and focusing on the approaching person.
- If you are having people visit your home and your dog is working on learning new skills you should keep your dog separated from guests until they learn better skills so that they don't practice the unwanted behavior.

For behavior and training advice, please contact Operation Kindness at [behavior@operationkindness.org](mailto:behavior@operationkindness.org) or visit [www.operationkindness.org/training](http://www.operationkindness.org/training).