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Resource Guarding in Dogs

What is resource guarding?

Resource guarding (RG) refers to a dog's desire to maintain possession of a resource. As a result, a dog may show escalating warning signals and aggressive behaviors in an attempt to prevent an item from being taken away. This can happen in interactions with humans or other animals. RG is a common behavior in dogs because it is a survival tactic for their species.

What are common resources a dog may guard?

It is common for dogs to want to maintain possession of things that they determine to be of value. Common resources include but are not limited to: food, chews, favorite toys, their own body parts, areas where they sleep, larger spaces like rooms, or specific people.

What do resource-guarding behaviors look like?

RG behaviors occur on a spectrum of increasing intensity, ranging from moderate to severe. Mild behaviors are more subtle and difficult to detect, but serve as a warning to the more severe behaviors listed below.

Mild behaviors may include:

- Hovering over or hiding items
- Freezing when the item is approached
- Increasing how quickly they eat or chew when approached
- Picking up an item and moving it away from others

Moderate behaviors may include:

- Freezing and giving a fixed, hard stare to an approaching human or animal
- Growling, snarling, barking, snapping, or baring teeth when the item is approached by a human or another animal.

Severe behaviors may include:

- Lunging, biting, or attacking an approaching human or animal

Tips for Managing your Dog's Resource Guarding

Prevention, in the form of management strategies, is the first step to reducing RG behaviors. Dogs with continuing or escalating RG behavior should work with a qualified trainer.

Tip 1: Prevent Confrontation by Managing the Environment

- In multi-pet households, separate all animals prior to feeding or giving treats.
- Pick up and put away toys outside of playtime.
- Feed your dog on a schedule to maintain consistency and set a routine.
- Always let your dog finish their food or chew uninterrupted.

Tip 2: Build a Trusting Partnership, it is a myth that you have to show a dog who's boss to resolve resource guarding. In reality, trying to do so will likely provoke a bite and teach the dog that they cannot trust you. This type of approach often intensifies guarding behaviors. Instead, focus on creating trust by following the management tips listed here.

Tip 3: Never Punish a Growl. Never punish or scold your dog for growling, snapping, or baring teeth. A dog that is punished for growling will learn to bite without warning. Instead, think of these behaviors as early warning signals that your dog is not okay with the situation. Respond by giving your dog space and then re-engaging when the dog is calmer.

Tip 4: Always Trade Up. In emergency situations where you absolutely must take an item away from your dog, always trade up! Do so by offering your dog high-value treats, such as cheese or hot dogs. Toss the treats a few feet away from the item. Wait until your dog moves towards the treats and away from the item before retrieving it.

Tip 5: Earning Resources. Teach your dog that access to favorite toys, foods, and activities only comes through good behavior. Before giving your dog a resource, ask them to sit or perform another behavior they know and love. Pretty soon, your dog will learn to "say please" by sitting or offering another known behavior as a way of asking for what they want. Creating this habit in your dog helps them remain calmer and show increased cooperation.

Tip 6: Qualified Training. While it may be easy and quick to punish a dog for showing RG behaviors, the fallout can be costly. Punishments and any methods that focus on suppressing the dog's outward behavior yield inconsistent results and lead to escalated aggression. Choose to work with a trainer that focuses on changing the dog's emotional response to being approached while in possession of a resource. For long-term positive results, your trainer will use food in training and reward-based methods that build up your bond with your dog.

For more information on this topic here are some helpful resources:

[Mine! A Practical Guide to Resource Guarding](#) by Jean Donaldson

[Resource Guarding: Treatment and Prevention](#) by Patricia McConnell