

Why does my dog guard food, toys and beds?

Like humans, dogs understand the concept of possession and ownership of resources. Perhaps also like some humans, dogs can take excessive measures to guard these resources. The types of resources can be numerous, but the most common and problematic ones are usually food, objects (toys/chews etc) and particular locations such as their bed, your bed or their crate.

Where resource guarding manifests itself in dangerous aggression, you should seek the advice of a professional behaviourist who can make a comprehensive assessment of the causes and develop a detailed corrective programme. This article is intended as guidance to help prevent or aid minor cases of this behaviour.

How can I stop FOOD guarding?

This is the most common type of resource guarding. It is usually easy to spot and occurs when a dog is aggressive (or threatens to be) when approach whilst eating from their food bowl. It can also occur when an owner attempts to retrieve food items snatched or found by the dog. Dogs are also known to guard their empty food bowls.

First things first, disciplining your dog for food guarding, is more likely to aggravate the problem than cue it. Using harsh discipline often results in the dog deciding that it needs to be even more aggressive to retain this resource.

The reason a dog guards its food is the fear that the approaching person is going to take it away. So we need to remove that fear and create positive associations with people approaching its food. The best way to achieve this is to tempt your dog away from its bowl with an even tastier resource (i.e. its favourite treat). Do this in small steps and start by keeping a distance from the food bowl. Let your dog take the treat and return to its bowl. Over a number of sessions, gradually get closer to the bowl to the point where you can drop the treats into its bowl. Further develop this by offering the treats right next to the bowl whilst the dog is eating. Different people should carry out these exercises to avoid the positive associations only being related to one person and the dog continues to guard when others approach.

Another useful exercise, particularly to prevent food guarding, is to feed your dog in small instalments. This is where you feed your dog a small amount of its food, and then take the bowl away to add more food. Repeating this 3-4 times until its meal is finished. Again, this exercise helps build positive associations as your dog soon learns that when the bowl is taken away, it is going to be returned with more food.

How can I stop TOY & OBJECT guarding?

Guarding of this nature usually relates to dog toy and dog chews, but can also relate to more obscure items such as laundry, tissues, food wrappers or objects found by the dog or have a particular smell.

As with food guarding, we need to look to building positive association around people approaching the guarded objects. We want the dog to understand that approaching people and the removal of objects means more fun, excitement or a special treat.

A good place to start is by approaching your dog whilst near an unguarded low value object. Pick up the object with one hand then produce a treat from behind your back with the other. Then give the object back and walk away. Repeat this, but change the angle of approach and intervals between approaches. Work on this over a number of sessions, then change the exercise so that as you offer the object back to the dog, as soon as they touch it, withdraw it then praise and treat, then give the object back.

Over time, start to carry out the exercise with higher value objects. Then move onto carrying out the exercise when the dog is more engrossed with the object. But always remember to keep it positive and that the removal of resources results in even more positive experience.

Another useful exercise to help against object guarding is to introduce the concept of sharing. This works particularly well with chew toys and the exercise involves you offering a chew toy to your dog, but keeping a hold of the other end yourself.

Allow your dog to enjoy the chew, but after a period, take it away for a spell then offer it back. Your dog soon understands that the resource is not his, but he is allowed to share it. Practice this with different people and objects.

How can I stop LOCATION guarding?

A common behavioural concern of owners is aggressiveness by their dogs whilst in a particular location. The most common locations being their sleeping area, which could be their bed or crate, you're bed or the sofa. An interesting feature of location guarding is that the level of severity is not only tied to the value of the resource, but also to who is approaching. For example a dog may allow a child to approach but not an adult. Or perhaps a woman can approach, but not a man.

We always recommend that you prevent dogs sleeping on your bed or on sofas from an early age. Sleeping in the same place as the pack leader (that's you!) or in an elevated location (on sofa) gives your dog a higher sense status within the pack hierarchy. Not only can this cause guarding, but it can also cause other issues such as difficulties with training and general challenging behaviour. Our article [How to be the pack leader](#) provides useful tips to ensure your dog recognises you as the pack leader and that they carry the lowest rank in the household.

Some dogs show guarding behaviours whilst in their bed or crate. This is usually when a person attempts to handle, caress or move them. The reasons for this may be varied, it could be they are just tired and want to be left alone or it could be that they are poorly. Obviously in the later case, you should seek advice from your vet. But in all other cases you need to accustom your dog to being handled whilst they are in these locations. Like other forms of guarding, the best solution is to make this a positive experience. Start by offering the dog high value treats whilst in these locations, and then start to lure them from the location with further tip bits. Keep practicing this over a number of sessions and like food guarding, change the angle of approach, the intervals and the person who does the exercise. Over time your dog will soon learn that positive things always happen when people approach previously guard locations.