

## That's MINE! Understanding Resource Guarding

### What is Resource Guarding?

Dogs may guard stuff when they are worried that someone might take away something valued. Valued items might include just about anything—food, a toy, a bone, a tasty scrap, dinner, water, a favorite bed or blanket. It may even be a person, another dog, or space!

### What Does Resource Guarding Look Like?

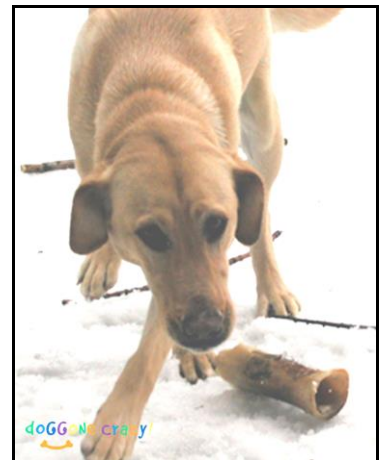
Learning how to read dog body language is really important to helping you identify when a dog is uncomfortable—in this case, worried about someone taking away his or her stuff. You may see these behaviors, among others: giving a dirty look or a hard stare; stiffening and tensing; lowering the head and body; hovering over the object; and/or growling, lunging, snapping, or baring teeth (Figures 1 and 2). What you are looking for is a *change* in the dog's demeanor and body language as you approach the object they may be guarding. For example, a dog is happily chewing on his bone. You approach the dog, and as you get closer, the dog's body language changes from a loose wagging tail and chewing to a stiff body, still tail, the mouth closes and face tenses, and the dog gives you a direct hard stare. As you get closer (not advised), the dog's body language intensifies, and he may growl or bare teeth.

### What NOT to Do

Your dog's guarding reaction may surprise you, or make you angry, or upset. Don't take it personally. The dog is communicating that s/he is worried about losing something s/he values. It does not mean that your dog wants to be the boss of you, or that you aren't "alpha" enough. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth—your dog is actually doing something that occurs quite naturally in the animal world—protecting resources is a practical matter to survival. Approaching this issue with the intent to show the dog who is wearing the pants in the family will either create a combative, escalating situation, or it will frighten and intimidate. Neither sounds very nice, does it?

People (even other trainers and training websites) may tell you to correct the dog—yell, snatch the item away, push the dog, or even worse, strike the dog. Some people may tell you that you must "show the dog who is boss". This terrible advice runs the very real risk that it will worsen the behavior (of not immediately, then possibly over time)—and put you and your family at risk for injury. Okay, say you do assert yourself as "alpha" and the dog stops guarding from you. That does not mean s/he will be safe for a child who gets too close to the dog when s/he is eating, or when a guest tries to take a toy. Check out Figure 3 to see how dogs may interpret positive and punitive approaches to resource guarding.

Even though you might be frightened or angry, acting out of that might just confirm in your dog's mind that s/he does have a reason to worry about people taking his/her things. Instead, we want to show the dog that that you aren't a threat, and that it's great to have a person around his/her stuff! In other words, we are changing the dog's underlying fears and worries—and if we can successfully do this, the dog will no longer have a reason to guard his/her things. It's a safe win-win for everyone involved.



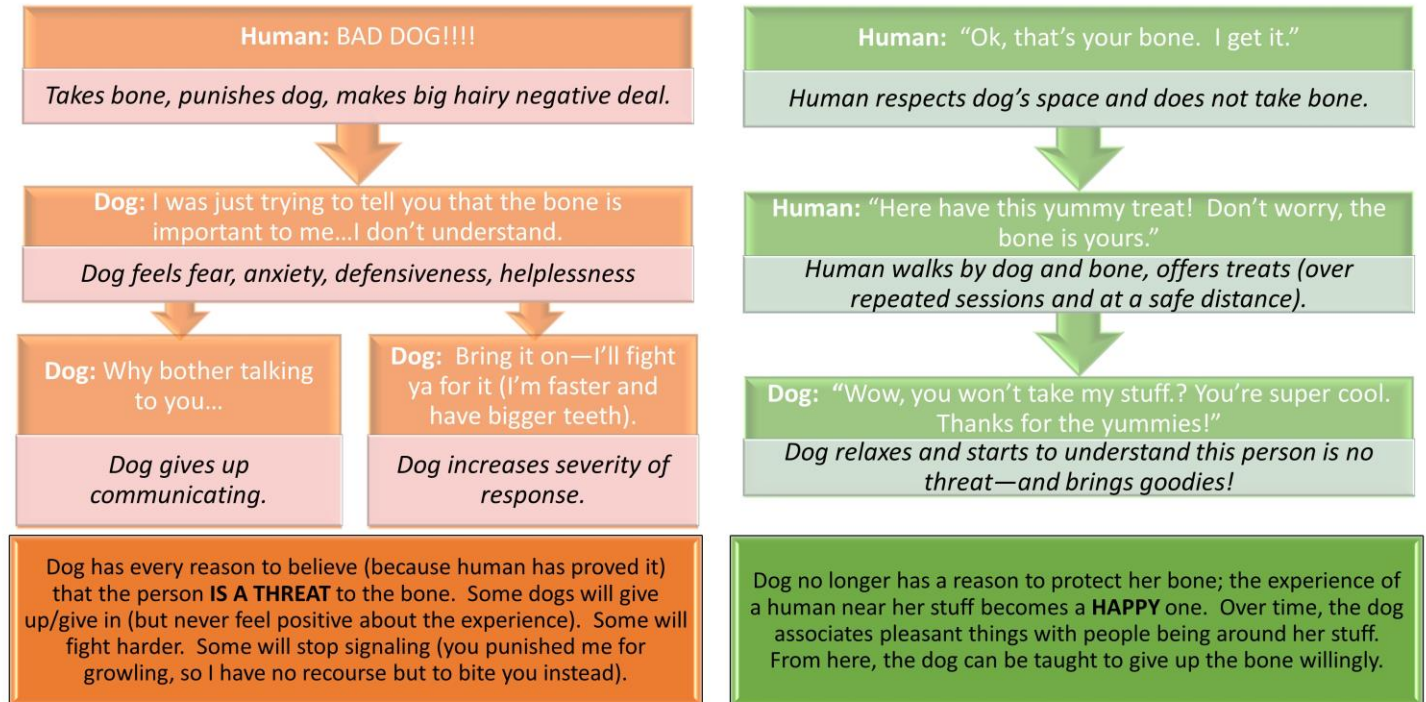
*Figure 1. Dog guarding a bone. Note the lowered head, looming stance, tension in face and ears (Photo source: Doggone Safe (doggonesafe.com))*



*Figure 2. Dog guarding a toy. Note the muzzle and paw over the toy and the white of the eye showing with a direct stare. (Photo source: Doggone Safe (doggonesafe.com))*



## Two Paths: Dog-Human Conversation Regarding a Bone



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Figure 3. How dogs may interpret positive and punitive approaches to resource guarding.

## What You Can Do

Below are links to four short easy reads that have excellent advice about resource guarding.

- <https://positively.com/dog-behavior/aggression/resource-guarding/>
- [https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/18\\_8/features/Resource-Guarding-And-What-To-Do-About-It\\_21282-1.html](https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/18_8/features/Resource-Guarding-And-What-To-Do-About-It_21282-1.html)
- Trading can be a great way to help with resource guarding as well as prevent it: [https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/17\\_4/features/Trading-With-Your-Dog-to-Combat-Resource-Guarding\\_20951-1.html](https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/17_4/features/Trading-With-Your-Dog-to-Combat-Resource-Guarding_20951-1.html)
- For dogs who guard from other dogs: [https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/14\\_10/features/Resource-Guarding-Behavior-Modification\\_20368-1.html](https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/14_10/features/Resource-Guarding-Behavior-Modification_20368-1.html)

I also recommend anything by Jean Donaldson, Patricia McConnell, Victoria Stilwell, or Pat Miller.



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A few more tips, mostly about **preventing resource guarding** (and there are more tips in the articles above):

- **Teach your dog to trade** (see the article above on how to do this). Dogs that learn to trade will happily give up their stuff when asked.
- **Toss yummy treats** into the food bowl or at the toy/bone your dog is chewing as you walk past; your dog will learn that people around his/her stuff brings goodies. The reaction we want from the dog is a bright happy face, relaxed body, and tail wag. As your dog remains happy with your approach (your dog's receptivity, as judged by his/her body language, determines how close you can get and how quickly you can do so), you can get closer, and eventually, working toward pat the dog or pick up the treasured object.
- **Know your dog's signals**; reading body language will help you understand when your dog is stressed, defensive, or when s/he's relaxed and happy. For free and low-cost lectures on reading dog body language: <https://www.goldstardog.com/woof/>. Also, [www.doggoneseafe.com/](http://www.doggoneseafe.com/) has great resources on this.

### ***MYTH BUSTER: Taking your dog's food (and other stuff) and sticking your hands in his bowl will prevent resource guarding***

You may have heard that doing these things prevents resource guarding. By doing these things, you may be giving your dog REASON to guard his stuff.

I don't recommend continuously sticking your hand in his food bowl, constantly taking away toys, and/or pestering your dog in this way.

Think about it: if you were enjoying a nice dinner, and someone kept pulling the plate away, sticking his/her fingers in your food, or pulling your ears, wouldn't you want to punch that person in the nose? Well, doing these things to the dog creates a reason for your dog to protect himself and his stuff and feel defensive.

It's better to use a technique like trading to show your dog that people around his stuff is good. Dogs that learn to trade happily give up their stuff when asked.

### ***IMPORTANT!***

Resource guarding can become dangerous and can escalate quickly. The information in this article are not a substitute for professional advice, care, diagnosis, or treatment.

If your dog is behaving aggressively, is experiencing fear or stress that seems to be worsening or bleeding into other areas of your dog's life, or the situation seems to be escalating, **seek out a dog training professional** who has experience with behavioral issues, the use of positive training techniques, and will refrain from training that involves punitive or force-based approaches.