

# Your Smart Dog

## Mine! An Owners Guide to A Resource Guarding Dog

### May 2010

**It happened in a flash. Tango was trying to go from the kitchen into the dining room.** I didn't know it, but Talos was hiding a rawhide in there and he bit Tango before I knew what happened. All I heard was a big growl, a surprised yipe, and then I yelled "Hey!" (That's my standard interrupter for disagreements.)

**I could tell there was damage, I just didn't know how much or how severe.** A quick check revealed a big hole in Tango's ear. And lots of blood. All's well now, Tango's ear will have a notch missing, but he'll be fine. This month's newsletter will look at resource guarding (RG): what it is, how to recognize it, and things you can do to help reduce it.

**Talos' behavior is classic example of RG.** Talos guards things he classifies as "high value:" a rawhide or a meaty bone. RG is a normal behavior, but it's rarely appropriate behavior. What's the difference, you ask? Well, it's normal because it's what dogs had to do throughout the course of time to survive. If a dog came across a deer carcass, he had to guard it from other predators or else he'd go hungry. That's normal **and** appropriate. If the dog didn't guard the carcass, he'd lose it. RG is inappropriate when there's no real threat of losing something or when the resource isn't valuable to the other party (be it person or dog).

**A guarder usually hunkers down over his object, gives a hard stare to anyone who looks at or comes toward the object, he'll growl, he might bare his teeth, and he may lunge and/or bite.** If the dog is guarding a location, say the couch or the bed, he may lower his head, stiffen, growl, and then, if those other warning signals are ignored, bite.

**Most people do the wrong things when they notice a RG problem.** While it may make sense to tell the dog "No!" when he growls, that's the worst thing to do. By telling the dog not to growl, you're merely eliminating a warning sign without addressing the real problem.

**If you notice your dog developing a RG problem, the first thing to do is manage the problem.** This means feeding the guarder separately if he's guarding his food bowl. Or giving him a rawhide in his crate or in a different room (and blocking access to that room). Or by just

eliminating rawhides or other high value items from your RG dog. You're preventing the guarder from practicing his inappropriate guarding, and that keeps the behavior from becoming a habit.

**If the dog guards space, don't allow the dog into that space.** If he guards the couch, then he's no longer allowed on the couch. For safety, let the dog drag a leash when you're home so you can remove the dog from the couch without putting your hands on the dog.

**Avoid physical confrontation at all costs.** Physical force or intimidation is never a good strategy when working with resource guarding (or any problem!) and this can make the problem worse.

**Management is often the optimal tool** for food, rawhide, and toy guarders - it's usually much easier to simply separate the dogs when eating or enjoying a rawhide. If the dog is also aggressive toward people in the presence of food or rawhides, then feeding in the crate is the

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only safe way for the dog to eat or enjoy rawhides. A qualified positive reinforcement trainer or veterinary behaviorist is necessary in cases of aggressive RG.

Don't take the dog's bowl away "just to show him you can." That's a great way for the pup to learn that when you approach, his food disappears.

**If the dog guards space, simply teaching the dog a "touch" or targeting behavior can be enough to diffuse the situation.**

Teaching the dog to touch his nose to your hand is called targeting and comes in handy for space guarders: If the dog is on the couch, it's very simple to give the "touch" cue and the dog will then jump off the sofa to touch your hand. A click and a treat is all that's necessary, the dog is now safely on the floor, and you can enjoy the sofa.

**Puppy owners can do a few things to ensure their dog doesn't become a RG.**

First: don't take the dog's bowl away "just to show him you can." That's a great way for the pup to learn that when you approach, his food disappears - you can actually *create a guarding dog* this way. Instead, sit with the pup while he's eating and drop a pea-sized piece of chicken into his bowl every few seconds. Make sure everyone in the house participates, even children. Be sure to supervise closely the interactions between the child and the dog during this training. They shouldn't play in the food bowl or pet the dog. Simply drop the chicken in and wait a few seconds before dropping another piece in.

**As the pup learns that good things happen when hands approach his food bowl, begin to walk up to the food bowl to drop the chicken in.** After you drop the chicken in, take a few steps past the bowl, turn around, approach again and drop another piece of chicken in. When the pup is wagging his tail expectantly every time you approach is food bowl, you can then pick up the food bowl, put the chicken in, and give the food bowl immediately back to the pup. Never tease the pup with the food bowl.

**It's important to teach your dog to nicely give up items he has in his mouth.**

Too often, resource guarding is created when owners only approach the dog to take away something the dog has. The dog learns very quickly to dread the owner's approach, particularly if he has something in his mouth.

**The same protocol can be used for this as was used for the food bowl.**

When your dog has a toy, approach him with happy voice and offer him a pea-sized piece of chicken. He'll probably drop his toy to take the treat. Pick up the toy while he's eating the chicken and offer it to him immediately. Continue to exchange chicken for toy randomly throughout the day. You can start to put a name on it like "thank you," or "give."

It's much easier to prevent RG than it is to treat it, so even if your dog hasn't shown any signs of trouble, it's easy to teach your dog that your approach is a good thing. Have fun training!

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