

# Preventing Object Guarding and Food Aggression

By Sherry Woodard

## What is object guarding?

An object-guarding dog is one who guards objects that he considers to be valuable. Often, the object is food or a treat, but it can also be other objects such as a toy, a bone or an item picked out of the trash.



## Why is object guarding a problem?

It is not unusual for dogs to covet objects and guard them from each other. In a group, dogs often threaten each other, but then one of them backs down and everything's fine. In a home environment, however, object guarding can be dangerous if your dog sees you or other family members as someone he needs to guard against. You can easily get bitten trying to take something away from a dog who is a serious guarder.

Children can be especially vulnerable, since they are at eye level to the dog and may not understand personal space. Keep children away from a dog until the dog is willing to give up any item when you issue the cue "give it."

## How can I prevent my dog from guarding food?

The following exercise should only be done by adults (not children) and it should be used to prevent serious guarding behavior from starting. If your dog is already guarding his food or other objects, read the resource called "Managing Object Guarding and Food Aggression."

Here's how to prevent guarding:

Place an empty food bowl on the floor. Sit or kneel on the floor near the bowl with a bag of kibble. With your hand, place a few pieces of kibble in the bowl. Say to the dog, "Take it," and let the dog eat the kibble. After you and your dog practice this routine a few times, place a few more pieces in the bowl, but this time keep your hand on the bowl. If the dog is fine with your hand on the bowl, practice three more times.

Then, if there have been no signs of guarding (growling or stiffening), put a few pieces of kibble in the bowl, but this time, take the bowl away and add a treat to the kibble – something that your dog likes even more than kibble (such as 1/2 spoonful of wet food). Give the bowl back to the dog so she can eat. Practice this routine five times. Use just a few pieces of kibble each time, adding only a small amount of wet food or a small treat. (You don't want a sick dog or a fat one!)

If your dog has still shown no signs of guarding, move on to the next step. Stand up and remove the bowl from the floor. Add a morsel of wet food and return the bowl to the dog. Repeat five times. If you can complete all these steps without signs of guarding, you should be able to safely feed your dog. One thing to remember, though, is that she may be fine with you, but not with other people who attempt to feed her.

If the dog becomes uncomfortable at any point, back up to the step where she was relaxed and work forward from that step again. If your dog is a serious guarder already (growling or stiffening up when you try to take something from her), read “Managing Object Guarding and Food Aggression.” In fact, you may want to get help from a reward-based trainer.

### **How can I train my dog not to guard other objects?**

Dogs who guard food may also guard other objects, such as a toy or bone. You can train your dog not to guard these objects by getting him to “trade up” for something better. If you practice with many levels of trades, your dog will always expect something better in return for what he’s giving up, and will gladly relinquish the guarded object. Here’s how it works:

First, do not have high-value items (things the dog values highly) lying around while you’re training. Start with something that your dog has very little interest in. Give him the object and say “take it.” Then, say “give it” and take the object back. Reward him with a treat from your pocket. Practice this routine five times, then walk away. Repeat three times the first day.

On the second day, move to a slightly more valuable item. As on day one, do five trades (accompanied by “take it” and “give it” cues) three times throughout the day.

On the third day, put a more valuable item on the floor and bring the dog’s attention to it. After he settles in for a chew, ask him to trade (“give it”) for a higher-value item. If he shows no signs of guarding, you can practice this routine a few times. Again, as with food, back up to the step before if your dog becomes uncomfortable.

Remember – be very careful. Do not include other adults in the training until you can trade up for the highest value item with ease.

### **How long do I have to practice these routines?**

If you have a dog with a tendency to guard food or objects, you should practice the above routines often to prevent any future problems.

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