

# Managing Object Guarding and Food Aggression

By Sherry Woodard

*Please use caution at all times when working on managing object guarding and food aggression. If you are at all uncomfortable with doing the techniques described below, ask a reward-based trainer for help in teaching your dog not to guard food or objects.*



Guarding (possessiveness) is a natural, normal behavior for dogs. Some dogs will guard any valued item or space – their food, food bowls, toys, treats, chewies, bones, beds, couches. But, object guarding can be dangerous if a dog sees a person 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.

Dogs who have shown guarding behaviors can be taught new associations to help keep them and their families safe. First, if guarding is a new behavior, visit a veterinarian for a health check. As with any sudden behavior change, the dog may have a medical issue that needs to be addressed.

To manage guarding behavior, you'll do two things: hand-feeding and practicing trades. Start hand-feeding and practicing trades at the same time. To hand-feed, stop using a food bowl and start hand-feeding all meals to the dog, giving him a few pieces of kibble at a time. By doing this, you'll change the association of hands near the dog's food from negative to positive. When you practice trades with the dog, you'll teach him to always expect something better, making it worth trading.

When doing the hand-feeding and trading exercises, work with only one dog at a time. No other dogs should be within sight of your guarder. To stay safe and for the best chance of success, work at the dog's pace. Do not move on to the next step if the dog is not improving.

If the dog becomes threatening (growling, stiffening up, etc.) toward you at any point, back up to the step where she was relaxed and work forward from that step again. If the dog is a serious guarder already when you start training, you must be very careful and pay close attention to the dog's body language to detect any signs of guarding. Again, if you become uncomfortable while doing the exercises, stop and get help from a reward-based trainer.

Here are the steps for teaching trades:

1. Start by giving the dog something she has never cared enough about to guard (a "low-value item"). Tell the dog to give it up (say "give it" or "give"). Take the item and hand the dog a small yummy treat that you have tucked in your hand out of sight. Give the low-value item back and walk away. Wait two minutes. Then, approach again and repeat the exercise six times.

2. Practice for three days – doing six approaches daily. Each day, change the low-value item to a different low-value item.
3. After three days of practice, approach the dog and hold out an object that she has guarded in the past (a high-value item), but don't allow her to take it. Say "give" as if you are asking for the item and take the item away while handing her a small yummy treat.
4. Again, practice six approaches each day for three days. Change the item each day to a different high-value item that the dog has guarded before.
5. After three days of practice, approach and hand her one of the high-value items that you have used before. Walk away (at least six feet) and wait two minutes. Then, take a deep breath, relax, smile and approach the dog. Say "give," take the item, and hand her a small yummy treat.
6. Again, practice six approaches each day for three days. Remember to change the high-value item daily to other previously guarded items.
7. After three days of practice, lay all the high-value items on the floor and wait for the dog to settle on one. Then, approach with a small treat tucked in your hand. Practice six approaches, exchanging the high-value item for the small treat. Between approaches, remember to walk away and wait two minutes before approaching again.
8. If the dog is still doing well, leave the high-value items on the floor and practice the exercise at least three times each day for at least a week.

To reinforce the lesson, it's a good idea to have other adults work with the dog. Start them off with the low-value items and have them work their way through the exercises. Supervise their interactions so you can see how the dog is doing. It also helps to practice in a variety of locations by taking high-value items and treats on outings.

If you have a dog who guards food or objects, you should practice the above routine often to prevent any future problems.

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