

Issues Around Food, Toys



FOREVER HOUNDS TRUST

Matching greyhounds and lurchers to happy homes

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And Resting Areas

The majority of our dogs are ex-racers, or have come from working backgrounds. As such, they are not used to spending time in a home environment, and this can affect their relationship with important resources such as food, toys and resting areas. Some dogs are not comfortable sharing these resources with people or other dogs, especially when they first arrive home.

What is resource guarding?

The term “resource guarding” refers to the tendency of some dogs to feel uncomfortable about being approached by people or other dogs whilst in possession of a resource. This could be their food bowl, a long lasting chew or treat, a favourite toy or a preferred resting area such as the sofa or your bed. You may find that your dog growls, snaps or even bites if you attempt to remove these items from them, or if he is approached whilst he has them.

This behaviour is often misinterpreted as “dominance” or an attempt by the dog to control their new family. In reality, it is motivated by anxiety, fear and insecurity – your dog values the item in question very highly, is worried that it will be taken away, and feels the need to defend it. During his time as a racing or working dog, it is quite likely that your dog did not have access to high value treats or chews, toys, or comfy resting areas such as the sofa. Unsurprisingly, these items will be extremely exciting and novel, and your dog will probably value them very highly!

In addition, dogs who have spent their lives in a kennel environment are generally not used to being approached or disturbed whilst eating or sleeping. Most pet dogs learn as puppies that these situations are safe, but your dog is likely to have missed out on this experience – it is understandable that he might feel vulnerable at these times.

How to avoid resource guarding

Since this behaviour is often misinterpreted as “dominance”, adopters are regularly advised that they must “show the dog who’s boss”. This tends to involve repeatedly taking high value items away from the dog, or



punishing them when they show resource guarding behaviours. However, doing either of these things will simply confirm your dog's fear - being approached whilst he has a valued resource is definitely something to be avoided!

This is a dangerous tactic (as it can force the dog to bite), will make the behaviour worse in the long term, and will make it impossible for your dog feel safe around you. Instead, we want your dog to learn that he doesn't need to defend his resources from you, and that being approached whilst he has them is a good thing!

When it comes to resource guarding, prevention is always the best cure. Following the advice below from day one will help your new dog to feel safe and secure around resources at home, and to trust his new family:

- All dogs should be left alone when eating (both at mealtimes or when given a chew/treat). It is totally normal for them not to enjoy being disturbed at these times. Repeatedly taking the bowl away or sticking your hand into it will simply irritate your dog, and may cause an issue where there wasn't one before. How would you react if someone kept taking your dinner away whilst you were eating? At some point, you'd probably get fed up and tell them to go away! Dogs are no different in this regard, but they can only communicate their frustration through physical behaviours such as growling.
- Always feed your new dog separately from any resident dogs. Again, it is normal for dogs not to want other dogs around them whilst they eat, particularly when they don't know them well. Some rescue dogs may have had to compete with others for food in the past. Similarly, you should separate your new dog from any resident dogs when giving high value, long lasting food items (such as raw bones, food filled toys or dental chews).
- Never take food items away from your dog whilst he is still eating them. This will teach your dog to be suspicious of being approached at these times, making him feel the need to defend his resources from you. Wait until he's either finished or has left the item before removing it.
- If your dog has stolen an item (food or otherwise) which you cannot allow him to have, always swap for another item of similar or higher value. Throw the new item/treat away from your dog, and wait until he has dropped and moved away from the original item before retrieving it.
- The same advice applies to toys! If your dog has settled down to chew a toy, leave him alone. If he wants to play with you, he will let you know! If you need to pick the toy up, offer an alternative as above.
- When you first start playing fetch, use two similar toys. Rather than try to physically take the first toy out of your dog's mouth, throw the second toy for him. You can pick up the first toy when he drops it to chase the second. He will soon start dropping the first toy voluntarily in anticipation of the next throw!
- Always give your new dog space when he is resting, either in his own bed or on the furniture. Resource guarding aside, many dogs can feel vulnerable when lying down, particularly when in an unfamiliar environment with new people. If your dog has been living in a kennel, he won't be used to having

anyone around him whilst he sleeps. If you want to join your dog on the sofa, encourage him to jump off using a treat before sitting down yourself – your dog can then decide whether or not he wants to join you!

- If your dog is resting and you need to interact with him, call him to you rather than approaching him in his bed. If he doesn't respond, leave him to rest!
- Always make sure your new dog is fully awake before you approach or interact with him, as some dogs can respond by growling or snapping when startled awake. You can do this by calling him softly and watching for a response before approaching.

What do to if your dog is resource guarding

Typical signs that your dog is uncomfortable about being approached whilst in possession of a resource include:

- Moving away from you with the item
- Eating/chewing more quickly/frantically when approached
- Freezing/tensing up when approached
- A hard stare (often with the head hovering over the item)
- Growling
- Showing teeth
- Snapping
- Biting

If you notice any signs of resource guarding in your new dog, follow the steps listed above and contact us for advice. Do not try to approach your dog or remove the resource, and do not punish or tell him off. Once he has left the resource, avoid giving him access to anything similar until you have spoken to our behaviour team.

The information provided in this document provides general guidance on the matters outlined and is not intended to replace the need for you to take qualified and appropriate behaviour/training advice on these matters.

Please remember, that as an owner of a Forever Hounds Trust dog you have access to our team of qualified behaviourists and FREE behaviour and training advice. No matter what your behaviour or training question is, we are here to help. You can contact the team by emailing: behaviour@foreverhoundstrust.org

Written by Rachel Cartwright, MSc, BSc (Hons) for Forever Hounds Trust, 2020.