

# “WHAT’S MINE IS MINE AND WHAT’S YOURS IS MINE!”

## RESOURCE GUARDING

by

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Does your corgi growl or lunge at you if you approach him while he’s eating? Has your puppy ever growled or snapped if you step near him when he has a bone or is playing with a toy? Does your dog bare his teeth if you approach the sofa or your bed when he’s on it? Does your corgi become reactive if another person or animal claims your attention? If one or more of these is the case, you have a resource guarder, a very common behavior in dogs, and one of the major causes of dog/dog and dog/human aggression.

Dogs are specialized wolf cousins, not *furry little people*, no matter how much Walt Disney movies would like us to think otherwise. Dogs and humans have many apparent similarities, so it’s easy to assume that everything dogs do is just like what we do, but this is not the case. For example, because we view dogs as part of our families, we tend to think that we should be able to take things away from the dog at will, and feel affronted when dogs become reactively possessive about objects. Despite the fact that dogs have been domesticated for thousands of years, we need to remember that they are predators (as opposed to grazers, who don’t need to guard resources) and are still hardwired to guard resources even though they have no need to do so—a genetic inheritance from their wolf ancestors. It’s beneficial to look after food and bits and pieces against the predations of other animals, including members of your own group. Any dog, of any breed or age, can resource guard, and resource guarding can crop up at any time in a dog’s life; the intensity of the guarding behavior depends on the value of the object to the dog and perhaps more importantly, how we deal with it.

According to Jean Donaldson in her book [Mine! A Guide To Resource Guarding In Dogs](#), there are five myths about resource guarding:

1. Resource guarding is abnormal behavior.
2. Because resource guarding is driven largely by genetics it cannot be changed.
3. Resource guarding can be cured by making a dog realize that resources are abundant. (I would love to know how anyone thinks they could communicate this concept to a dog!)
4. Resource guarding is a symptom of “dominance” or “pushiness”.
5. Resource guarding is the result of “spoiling” a dog.

What we must not do is to see resource guarding (which makes perfect sense from the dog's point of view) as an attempt on the part of the dog to assert dominance over us, or as having ulterior motives; it's far too simplistic to think that everything our dogs do that we disapprove of is a bid for power on their part, especially if it involves threat behavior. We can better spend our time teaching our dogs not to guard their (or our) possessions and to reward them for doing other things, such as relinquishing them on command.

If you have a resource guarder, it is never too late to train better behavior. If you breed or have a puppy, it's never too soon. We need to make sure that our corgis understand that the approach of a human to his food, toys, or space is always a good thing. For all but very reactive hardcore guarders (and for those I recommend the detailed training protocols in Jean Donaldson's resource guarding book or consulting a positive reinforcement behaviorist) the training is simple and effective, and should be implemented by all the members of your household.

1. Teach your dog a GIVE cue. Start with an object that is of low value to the dog. With the dog holding the object in his mouth, cause him to drop it by presenting a yummy treat next to his mouth. When he drops the object, feed the cookie, then let him pick up (or give him) the object again. (If you clicker train, click AS the dog is dropping the object, then treat.) After several repetitions, add your cue word—"drop it", "give", "let go", or "out" all work fine-it doesn't really matter what you call it. Say the verbal AS the dog is dropping the object. I call this game Let's Make A Deal (object exchange): trading an object for a tasty treat is fair to the dog and takes any possible physical conflict out of the equation: a win/win situation. Gradually trade for items of higher value to the dog, making sure to give a good cookie and to immediately allow him access to the object again. Trying to force a dog to relinquish something by prizing his mouth open is not the way to go!
2. Teach your corgi an OFF cue. If he is guarding furniture, teach him to jump off on cue: invite the dog onto the bed or sofa, then lure to the floor with a treat. (If you use the clicker, click as soon as he moves toward the floor, and treat when he is on the floor.) Repeat several times and when the dog is readily responding, add the "off" cue AS the dog is leaving the furniture. You can also use a hand signal as well as a verbal-pointing to the floor signals my corgis to get off-I don't have to say a word. Again, training an alternate behavior in a positive, non-punitive way takes potential conflict out of the equation-dragging the dog off the furniture by force does not.
3. Food guarding: put your dog's food bowl on the floor. As he begins eating reach to take the bowl away but as you are doing so, offer the dog a really good treat in exchange, then replace the bowl. Do several repetitions. If your dog snaps or lunges at you, or exhibits any signs of serious reactivity, please refer to Jean Donaldson's step by step resource guarding protocols. I train this with my own corgis, but I also leave them alone while they're eating, as I feel dogs should be allowed to eat their meals undisturbed.

4. Condition your corgi to expect good things when you approach him, especially if he has a highly prized resource, such as a bone. Walk up to him, give the treat, and leave. Repeat this for several days until he begins to look up at you with that “Oh boy, Mum’s here to give me a cookie!” expression on his face; with a corgi, it may take only a few repetitions! As this training progresses, you should see your dog voluntarily dropping his resource and acting happy to see you as you approach. When this happens, pick the object up, then immediately return it to the dog.

It is important to reiterate that any sort of physical punishment (including scruff shaking, alpha rolling, or force of any kind) will only exacerbate resource guarding behaviors-the use of force just convinces your dog that he was right, that humans are something he must protect his food, toys, or space from, and he may even become fearful of people-it’s a given that fearful dogs are far more likely to bite. This is not the kind of relationship we want with our corgis! When my corgi Scooter was still a puppy, he suddenly started exhibiting resource guarding of a bone by growling at me when I got near him. I immediately went and got some cookies and taught him Let’s Make A Deal, and it never happened again-an easy fix. Last summer I took on a year old fluffy who was given up because he had bitten the owner’s husband, who crawled under a table to grab something away from the puppy. The puppy growled, the husband smacked him, the puppy bit him, and it went downhill from there.\* He came to live with me as a result (three corgis are better than two!) and I went to right to work on training object exchange both when he was loose and when he was in his crate or under a table. I occasionally repeat this on a remedial basis-problem solved. It’s a good idea to do some maintenance training for the duration of your dog’s life, even if the dog has never shown any signs of resource guarding-older dogs that don’t see or hear very well can suddenly become very possessive of things.

\*There are a number of things wrong with this scenario from the dog’s point of view:

- ❖ Puppy was minding his own business with a resource under the table (enclosed, dark space).
- ❖ Large man came at him in a small space and tried to force him to let go of the object (puppy felt threatened and scared).
- ❖ Puppy growled (tried to warn man to leave him alone), but was ignored (man thought that growling was a sign of aggression rather than a warning signal).
- ❖ Man persisted (puppy shouldn’t be “defiant”) and was bitten-he then punished the puppy for biting-puppy had no idea what he had been hit for (dogs do not punish each other for resource guarding) and resorted to more intense guarding behavior and another bite.

As a result of a pet owner not recognizing or knowing how to deal with a normal dog behavior, the puppy was labeled aggressive, and sadly, the owners decided to get rid of him. They called me and asked me to take him rather than surrendering him to a shelter, but few dogs are rehomed that easily. Saddest of all is that it didn't have to happen-this dog would still be living with the family who loved him, had they dealt with resource guarding in a positive way.

It's a heartbreaking fact that many dogs end up in shelters or in rescue because they have exhibited resource guarding behaviors toward people or other dogs. By understanding that resource guarding is a normal dog behavior, knowing how to teach dogs and alternate behavior, and most importantly, educating the people who buy our puppies or adopt one of our rescues, we can dramatically decrease the numbers of dogs who lose their lives as a result of this genetically hardwired behavior. Dogs are not natural sharers, but they can learn to let go (literally) of "What's mine is mine and what's yours is mine!". It's well worth a little time and effort to train behavior that we find acceptable, and I'm sure you will agree that we owe our Corgis nothing less!