

Resource Guarding in your new Golden Retriever

Golden Retrievers are hands down the most amazing breed that I have had the pleasure to work with and to own in my lifetime. They are exceptionally smart, eager to learn, loving to the point of never wanting to leave your side, sweet as pie, very tolerable, adaptable and over all the best family dog a family could own. Having said all this, I want to remind you... they are still dogs.

The dog, *Canis familiaris*, a direct descendent of the gray wolf, *Canis lupus*: in other words, dogs as we know them are domesticated wolves. Wolves have a high drive to survive, driven to be pack leaders, are strong willed, they need to react quickly, and are intensely ambitious. So even though wolves have built up the dog to what it is today with its absolute loyalty, faithfulness, being a natural motivator, a strong strength of character, with strong communication instincts, we need to be reminded when raising these adorable fluffy pups on where they come from and to treat them accordingly. It's easy to forget when you think of the 'Golden Retriever' so let me open this up a bit further-

If at any time in your pup's upbringing they show signs of resource-guarding behaviors, don't worry, this is manageable, and can indeed be conditioned out of them. Consider the behavior from your dog's perspective, empathize, and start teaching him that you're not a threat at all to his new or tasty items you have given him. It's time to dive in and build a strong relationship of trust between the two of you. The goal is to convince your dog that as you approach them when they are in possession of a resource, you are not a threat to their resource. We as responsible owners have to teach them what is an appropriate way to behave around their belongings.

Dogs guard resources because they fear losing them. Sometimes the fear is learned through experience; someone has been taking valuable resources away from the dog. Some people seem to think they have the right to take anything away from their dogs at any time, and their dogs should let them, without protest...because they are Golden Retrievers, 'The most tolerable breed to date'. Well, as much as Golden Retrievers are indeed tolerable, sweet as pie and the best dogs around, taking resources from your new pup at any time is definitely something you want to avoid. By doing so this is a terrific way to create a resource-guarding behavior in your dog, yes even in a Golden Retriever.

Why Do Dogs Guard Resources?

Resource guarding is an innate and natural characteristic that your dog possesses as a throwback from their wild ancestry. It's a survival technique first and foremost. Your dog wouldn't be able to survive in the wild if they were unable to protect their food and other valued resources in their life.

Despite your Golden Retriever being otherwise domesticated, they can still be inclined to resource guard. This goes for any breed but since the Golden Retriever has been 'glorified' or 'put up on a pedestal' to be 'tolerable of anything' often times people don't think that Resource Guarding could be building as you are raising your new pup. New owners don't give this behavior a second thought really as they go into adopting a Golden as so 'eager to please' and the 'perfect dog in every way'.

This trait will manifest itself in an unconditioned dog as a protective reaction when they anticipate someone or other dog approaching them in an attempt to compete for or/and steal their resources.

Resource guarding dogs will react this way regardless of the human's intention and manner.

Some owners worry that resource guarding is a sign of your dog exerting its dominance or an indication that the dog has been spoiled like a petulant child. That is not the case.

Definitely don't react by exerting your own dominance over your dog if they resource guard. This will do nothing but reinforce in their mind that they cannot trust humans and they must amp up their protection even further. It's our jobs to simply teach them what's appropriate behavior day to day and how to react in certain situations.

How To Prevent Resource Guarding in Your Golden Retriever?

Most sources recognize that the key to preventing resource guarding is conditioning your dog right from day 1 upon bringing him or her home that they need to believe that the problem they expect – an approaching person – is actually not a problem at all. Rather, an approaching person is actually a precursor to something good, fun and exciting – like a treat or fun toy for instance.

If your dog is resource guarding their food – the most common form of guarding – you will need to instill in them the knowledge that food comes from you and is infinite. This will translate in their mind that your approach is indicative of even more delicious/higher value food being supplied.

As with all animal training, conditioning is not a quick fix that will produce immediate results. It is a gradual process whereby you slowly build up your dog's comfort levels to a point where they will not feel the need to resource guard against you or other humans.

Hand Feeding

Hand feeding is recommended as a powerful method to encourage your dog to trust you and recognize you as their primary food source.

If you can, begin hand feeding as soon as you receive your dog as a puppy, at least once a day for a few weeks.

This will teach your puppy or dog to accept your hand near their food, and goes a long way to prevent food guarding problems from ever beginning.

The Cure? Counter-Conditioning and Desensitization

Fear not – despite resource guarding being a natural behavior trait in many dogs, it is very much possible to condition your pup to abandon this attitude.

As with all animal training, prevention is always preferable to cure. When it comes to puppies, it's best to begin right away with conditioning against resource guarding. Just add it into your training regimen. Teach them from the start with positive reinforcement. Tell them when you are pleased with a certain reaction out of them and try to avoid punishing them for a not so called for behavior. The more wins you can have between the 2 of you, the more trust you will build and the tighter the bond you will have.

For older dogs, counter-conditioning and desensitization are the answer. Scary sounding technical terms, but don't fret, however. The process isn't too hard to follow for mild cases of resource guarding and your dog will hugely benefit from these anti-resource guarding conditioning techniques.

Here's the steps to go through-

1. Prepare an ample supply of high-value treats that you can toss. Small bits of cheese or meat work well.
2. Tether your dog to an eye bolt affixed to the wall for that purpose, or to a solid, heavy object. Give him a valuable chew object or a small bowl of food.
3. As your dog chews or eats, walk past him, taking care to stay at a safe distance from him. This may be six to eight feet beyond the end of the tether, or it may be closer. As you pass, toss several treats where he can easily reach them, near the bowl or chewie. Keep walking; do not pause to toss the treats. If your dog growls, lunges, or shows other obvious guarding behavior, you are too close.
4. Repeat Step 3 until, as you approach, you see your dog starting to look up in happy anticipation of the treats you are going to toss. When he does this consistently, decrease the distance between you by a few inches on your next passes.
5. Continue passing by and dropping treats, gradually decreasing the distance between you and your dog when you see that he is consistently happy (not showing any stiffness or signs of guarding) at each new distance. You are closing the gap.
6. When he is happy with you walking past at a distance close enough to touch him, pause as you pass, feed him a treat from your hand, then walk on. He is letting you into his 'bubble'. Make sure you don't break it.
7. When he stays happy with your pause-and-feed, gradually increase the length of time you pause and feed him. The increase should be no more than 1-2 seconds. As you increase the length of your pause, start talking to him in a happy voice as you feed him. "Good boy! Yes!" "Good job!" Teaching him/her that this is the reaction you are looking for.
8. When you can pause for 10 seconds and he stays happy, occasionally bend slightly and drop a treat into his bowl or next to his chewie, then feed some more from your hand and walk on.
9. Repeat, gradually increasing the number of times you bend and drop treats for him. At this point his 'bubble' is getting smaller.
10. Now gradually increase how much you bend over until you can touch the bowl or chewie. Remember, if you see any sign of tension, you have moved too quickly and potentially 'broken his bubble'. Back up a few steps and continue more slowly from there. You need to keep this trust strong.
11. Finally, as you are pausing, bending, and feeding him, occasionally pick up the toy or food bowl and trade him for a higher value treat or toy. If a positive react takes place or no reaction (which is still good) praise him and immediately return the bowl or object to him after he has happily allowed you to take it.

12. Now start the protocol over again at Step 1, with another person in your family serving as the passerby. Choose only an adult who can follow your explicit instructions. Continue until your dog is comfortable with all family members approaching him, then repeat with trustworthy visitors, again starting with Step 1. You have now built enough trust that he has let you into his 'bubble' without popping it. Congrats!

My hope is you will never run into this behavior but if you do, please know this can be conditioned out of them by following these steps. If you remember the background of where your darling new Golden originated from, and keep this in mind day to day I have no doubt your time with your new pup will be joyful and training will be quite easy as you walk him through these simple steps in conditioning.