

## Bone of Contention

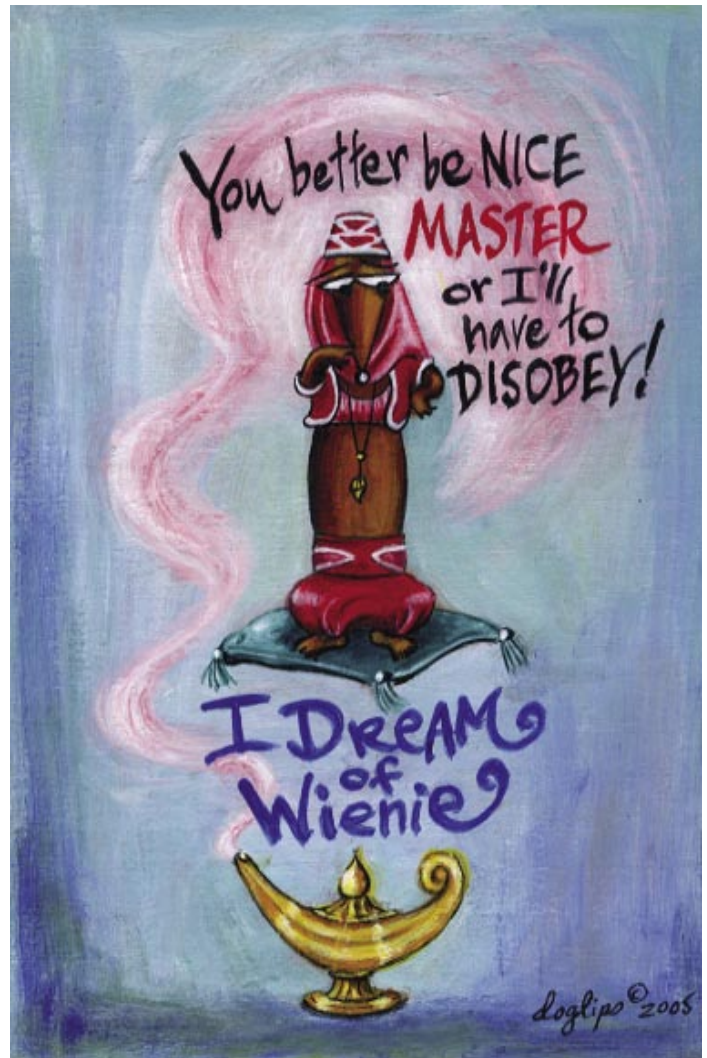
We all have such loving nicknames for our sweet canine companions. “Winsome” for Winston the Corgi, “Baby Doll” that cute little Yorkie – I even have a client who calls every dog she meets “Bunny.” By Deborah Rosen

Then imagine the shock when sweet little “Bunny” inexplicably freezes, snarls, growls, snaps, and, occasionally, bites if you come too close while she chews on her favorite bone or is eating. Even more upsetting is when “Baby Doll” is on your bed and decides she no longer wants to share it with you or another family member. This is “resource guarding” behavior, and when it appears it often does so with such ferocity that we wonder if our otherwise loving dog has suddenly turned into a psychotic beast – a good dog gone “bad.” This is not at all the case.

Resource guarding behavior is common in domesticated canines and a vestige of their pre-domestic past. Survival in the wild required that dogs guard their food, their pack members, and dens. Resource guarding is so instinctive and deeply hard-wired that even after generations of breeding for temperament and with little or no evolutionary pressure, this behavior still exists. Even Winston, the pudgiest of Corgis, who clearly has plenty to eat, will continue to guard his food bowl.

The remedy for Resource Guarding in domesticated dogs is not always quick or easy, but don’t give up. You may want to seek assistance from a dog trainer or behaviorist experienced in the methods of simple classical conditioning. Also called associative conditioning, this method pairs together one event as a predictor of another. Without realizing it, you probably do this type of conditioning ten times a day. Every time you pull out the leash your dog understands “it’s time for a walk.” For most dogs a walk is cause for celebration – the leash represents something that creates a feeling of happiness and excitement. The dog has learned that one good thing leads to another.

Classical conditioning is very effective in treating guarding behaviors. When you approach the dog at the food bowl, your close presence creates a negative feeling and an equally negative response. The negative feeling must be converted to a positive feeling to get the dog’s



behavior to shift. For example, in a dog with a mild case of guarding the food bowl (a low growl with mild snarling), you would fill the bowl with half of its normal food ration. As the dog is eating, approach the bowl with a spoonful of a “higher-value” food item than what is in the bowl – wet dog food, cottage cheese, peanut butter, whatever the dog likes. Wait until the growl stops, even briefly, and flick the food into the bowl.

Once the dog understands that you are coming toward him with something “yummier” than what is already in the bowl, the dog’s negative feelings begin to change with each approach (growls less, snarling ceases). Once the dog learns that he only gets the yummiest food when he stops the growling and snarling, you can be more selective and withdraw when you hear even the slightest growl. Over time and with enough repetition the growling should stop and be replaced by a feeling of pleasant anticipation when you approach the dog. Eventually, you should be able to lift the bowl away from the dog without any adverse reaction on his part. The key to success is in understanding that changing this behavior will take time and patience.

In treating your dog's resource guarding, be prepared for unexpected situations. If caught in a fix where the dog has a hold of something it values highly, try a simple "bait and switch." For example, offer a piece of string cheese in exchange for the coveted sock he has in his mouth. If that does not work, allow the dog to simply lose interest in the sock and collect it when he leaves it and put it away. Do not get into a power struggle with the dog. Avoid tempting situations by removing pigs' ears, bones, balls, tissues, and socks or other problematic objects. Reintroduce them only after you (or your trainer) have worked with the dog to get a reliable "drop it" or "release" behavior to replace the guarding.

Resource guarding behavior comes in many forms and if left unchecked can only grow worse. Mild aggression can turn into dangerous behavior, even biting, and once a dog has bitten and broken skin, correcting the behavior becomes more difficult. It is best to deal with the resource guarding when it first appears. Remember, dogs are simply animals—not complex beings. By anthropomorphizing them, (thinking of them in human terms) we do our beloved companion a terrible disservice. Sometimes the dog's frustrated owners take the dog to the pound, back to breeders, or even euthanize it for a behavior that can be fixed. With patience and understanding, you can recover the sweet loving little "Bunny" you knew before she started guarding her favorite "bone of contention." 🐾

## Tips from the Trainer

### How to Get a Reliable "Release"

1. Offer an interesting object to the dog (start with ball, toy, not a bone).
2. Before you allow the dog to take it withdraw with a "Mine", "Leave it" or "Drop" command. If the dog does this easily, give him a treat. Do this at least 10 times.
3. Offer the same object. Allow the dog to put it in his mouth for only a second, holding onto the object. Use your word command—when the dog releases the object, replace with a treat and praise. Do this 15 to 20 times leaving the object in his mouth for differing periods of time. Always dispense a treat when the object is released. If the object is released very quickly offer several small treats at once.
4. If the above is working reliably with no resistance, release the object into the dog's mouth for a second or two. Go back to retrieve the object with your command work (Mine!) and, if released easily dispense a treat and praise. If the dog shows any resistance go back to the previous step. Always be prepared to step back in the process with any sign of guarding behavior.
5. Only introduce a bone or a "higher-value" item when you have a reliable release for the lower value item first. Continue up the hierarchy of items until you can trust your dog to release each item quickly on command.

### Types of Guarding Behaviors:

- Food (food bowl)
- Objects (various types of bones, pig ears or toys)
- Location (bed, sofa, dog bed)
- Owner (from people or other dogs)
- Miscellaneous (leash, owner's objects)
- Own Body (due to lack of early socializing, which can include the head, neck, nails, paws, tail, muzzle/mouth)

Socialize your dog with a variety of people as early as possible to help him get used to being touched in each body part listed.