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“Resource Guarding?” Really?

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“Resource guarding” seems to be the latest term used to describe dogs that are threatening or aggressive when their owners attempt to take something away from them. In the scientific behavior literature, this would likely be referred to as “possessive aggression” that in some sources is said to be part of “dominance aggression”.

Typical scenarios might be when the owner approaches the dog when he is near a toy, a pig’s ear or other “chewie” he’s been given; when he has a “forbidden” item taken from the trash or other off limits location; or when he’s lying on a favorite resting spot the owner wants him to vacate.

While some dogs may be carrying the items and actively moving away from their owners, just as frequently the dogs are often lying down (often under a table, in a corner, or other somewhat protected location) have placed the “resource” on the floor next to themselves, and begin threatening when someone approaches.

By labeling this behavior “resource guarding” the immediate assumption has been made that this is a competitive situation and the dog’s motivation is to maintain control of the “resource”. But is that really the case in every instance? We think not.

In our own experience with these problems, the body language of these dogs was usually quite defensive – ears back, head lowered, small bouts of direct eye contact (or avoidance of eye contact all together) rather than a direct stare, and if teeth were bared we would see a clear defensive threat gape as opposed to an offensive one. In many of our cases, there was a history as well of owners prying open the dog’s mouth to take things away, and of other confrontational methods – scruff shakes, pin downs, sometimes even hitting.

More recent activities that got us to thinking about interpreting these problems differently were our review of two of John Bradshaw’s writings in preparation for a webinar about science and social dominance we’ll be giving (see the What’s New in ABA section of this ezine). The first publication was his 2009 article in the Journal of Veterinary Behavior and the second was his recent book [“Dog Sense”](#).

Bradshaw writes about alternatives to interpreting behaviors based on “dominance”, and one component of this re-interpretation is the dog’s expectations regarding an interaction. A dog’s behavior will be partly determined by his expectations about what’s going to happen next – based on what happened the last time in a similar situation.

The behavioral history of many of the “resource guarding” dogs, we saw revealed they had come to expect a bad outcome when their owners approached them when a “resource” was nearby or when they were occupying certain locations on a bed or couch.

For these dogs, we believe their behavior isn’t about maintaining control of the “resource”, but about preventing being man-handled and about stopping threatening behavior from their owners. Their expectations could also be viewed in terms of contextual learning. The context consists of the dog, the “resource”, and a certain type of approach by the owner predict “bad things” that the dog can prevent by displaying threatening or aggressive behavior and keeping his owner at bay.

Like most behavior problems, ones involving dogs that are threatening or aggressive in association with “resources” may have multiple causes. For some dogs this may be a true competitive interaction, but a growing body of evidence suggests this is likely the exception, not the rule.

To discover more about alternatives to the “dominance model” of dog-human interactions, attend the [“sizzling” webinar we’ll be conducting](#) for the Association of Pet Dog Trainers on July 4th AND members of [Behavior Education Network](#) have access to several of our prior presentations on this subject and additional articles within BEN.

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1. *Suz and Dan*
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Susan – sounds like you have a good method going for getting your dogs to release what they have. I don’t think the sniffing on your part increases the effectiveness of the trade, but if you enjoy doing it – go for it! Your dogs are probably “wondering what the heck is she doing and why!?”

2. *susan*
View [10 hours ago](#)

Distraction and substitution are two of my best friends. I got my guys to give me almost anything they have in their mouths by trading a better treat for the item. Then, I loudly sniff what they gave me and return it. I think they enjoy watching me sniff like a dog, so I take, sniff and return things without treats just to stay in practice. I wonder, are they

laughing at me or with me?

3. *Momoselli*

View [20 hours ago](#)

Excellent physical descriptions. I think you're right. Behavior is quite complicated and classifications can either help or miss the heart of the matter. Cheers to you and all the behaviorists out there. This stuff is baffling and tricky. I'm trying to learn what I can. (I privately wonder sometimes if this half-century requirement of well-behaved, in-yard, on-leash dog requirements was just too much to ask of these friends of ours, when I feel overwhelmed with the confusion of the whole thing.)



4. *Debra*

View [22 hours ago](#)

We have a 6 month of Chihuahua who is resource guarding ME. I see so much about how to deal with dogs guarding food, toys, space (bed, couch, etc) but NOTHING about people!!! Will your webinar cover resource guarding of people, or any suggestions where to look for info?

5. *Suz and Dan*

View [16 hours ago](#)

The term “dominance aggression” is widespread in the behavioral science literature unrelated to dog training. I don't think it is being “phased out” but the criteria used to invoke the term in the dog training world are hopefully becoming more precise.

6. *Me*

View [5 hours ago](#)

I thought that the term “dominance aggression” was being phased out.

7. *Suz and Dan*

View [13 hours ago](#)

Hi Bill – Sorry, we cannot provide solutions to individual pet behavior problems on this blog. I can tell you for sure that these problems are not “inherited”. It also is not related to having your dog neutered/”fixed”. If you had your dog neutered at the typical age – (at least under 2 yrs of age) – that's about the time aggression problem start. We would hear people all the time saying to us they'd “tried everything”, but the problem is they hadn't tried the RIGHT thing. Occasionally, a dog's behavior is so severe that it's not safe to have the dog in the home. But before making that decision you need to speak with a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, Veterinary Behaviorist or non-degreed certified trainer or behavior consultant with lots of experience to get a professional evaluation as to the likelihood your dog's behavior can be changed. Chances are it can. Good luck!

8. *Bill*

View [14 hours ago](#)

My dog is a bichon/shih tzu pure bred. He has this behavior and I have tried everything to break him of this habit. In thinking, why is a dog suppose to be calm when an owner first gives him something but then attempts to take it away? This puzzles me, but when my dog just “thinks” something is his, its the protective mode he enters into at that moment that puzzles me....why does he do it, and will he bite? My vet told me to put him down! It seems to have started when he was fixed. But no one believes me, they tell me it’s heritary??

9. *Suz and Dan*

View [19 hours ago](#)

Stacy – I think we already have a handout in the member area of Behavior Education Network about “resource guarding” but it probably doesn’t take this perspective. We’ll put it on our ‘to do’ list for sure. Can’t promise an exact delivery date but we’ll get it done!

10. *Suz and Dan*

View [19 hours ago](#)

Hey Diana – The answer is mostly yes. The thing is that dogs can display all these ritualized behaviors that reduce the chance of an outright fight – growling, posturing, etc. We humans just simply can’t effectively mimic those despite the claims that “alpha rolls” and scruff shakes and stuff do. The ritualized behaviors don’t involve that physical “take down” stuff that really puts dogs on the defensive. But if Dog A learns that Dog B is going to consistently be threatening when A tries to take away a specific toy from B, then chances are A will learn to leave B alone. But again – it depends on the value of the toy to A as well.

11. *Toni White*

View [15 hours ago](#)

Ditto about client handout! thanks

12. *Linda*

View [19 hours ago](#)

Yes, I too was wondering about a dog that does not like other animals (dogs or cats) near her when she has something or in her crate. You don’t see much about this type of “resource guarding” in the publications.

Thank you!



13. *theDIYdog*

View [8 hours ago](#)

Good points. Something else I’ve read recently (can’t remember where, unfortunately) is that for dogs, possession is 10/10 of the law. Even a high-ranking dog wouldn’t dream of taking a bone or toy away from a lower-ranking dog by force. When humans do this, they probably seem incredibly rude to the dog. The dog isn’t being “dominant”, but in dog law, he has a right to keep his chew toy and the human is the one in error.

14. *diana*
View [16 hours ago](#)

hi dan and suzanne

just wondering if you would draw the same conclusions based on similar behaviors between 2 dogs?

thanks.

15. *Stacy Hulen*
View [16 hours ago](#)

Looking forward to the Webinar! I would LOVE to have a client hand-out on this topic. Any plans to create one??



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Dan consulted with me about my lab Maxine - with Dan's help Maxine continued to be a beloved part of our family with no further problems until she died at the age of 13.

Susan DeFilippi, DVM
[Green Bay, WI](#)

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