

RESOURCE GUARDING IN DOGS

Resource guarding is a set of specific behaviour patterns shown by a dog to control access to an item of potential 'value' to that dog.

Greyhounds can sometimes show aggressive or repulsion behaviours whilst attempting to retain possession of items or food. Common examples of items that may be guarded include:

- Toys
- Beds
- Food
- Personal space

Some resource guarding behaviours can differ in intensity. It can vary from:

- Growling as soon as the greyhound sees a person approaching them and their resource. This may start with a low soft growl, intensifying as the person comes closer
- When eating, some greyhounds may growl and gulp their food at the same time
- Sometimes the dog may give a hard intense stare when a person comes into their view
- In extreme circumstances, when someone approaches, the dog may lunge, growl and attempt to bite

It is normal for a dog to want to retain possession of objects of value. However, issues arise when the dog attempts to guard things that belong to other people or animals or when the dog perceives fairly benign actions (e.g. walking past their bed) as a threat to their resources. Both of these situations require further help from a veterinarian with further training in behaviour. The GAPNSW team are also be able to provide assistance and/or guidance on where to seek help and to provide support to you and your greyhound.

Sometimes well-meaning adopters may even unintentionally cause their dog to develop resource guarding if they follow outdated advice focused on enforcing 'dominance' between humans and dogs. Such interactions are not recommended as they are not based on current scientific understandings of dog behaviour and often can result in an escalation of the problem as dogs learn that their owners are unpredictable and even dangerous.

Avoiding mismanagement:

It is important to view your relationship with your greyhound as a close emotional bond between two different species, and at no point in time should obedience be enforced with aggressive displays of 'dominance'. As such the following things should be avoided:

- Taking food away from the dog once given or teasing a dog with food. Except in situations where the dog has taken something potentially toxic/poisonous

- Disturbing the dog while they are eating
- Taking toys away from the dog without providing a valuable replacement e.g. a treat or throwing a different toy to play with
- Touching dogs when they lying down or lying on top of them (either if asleep or awake)
- Feeding household dogs together
- Physically moving the dogs off furniture or beds
- Grabbing dogs by the collar
- Hugging the dog, especially when he/she is still settling into their new home. We humans see hugs as a way of conveying our love, but this doesn't mean the same in dog language (it is often seen as a form of restraint!). A scratch under the chin or on the chest will convey your love to your furry companion in a much more polite way!

Setting your adopted greyhound up for success in their new home is done by ensuring they can feel secure in the environment that they now call home. This can be achieved by:

- Feeding the dog in a different room from other family members and not disturbing them whilst they are eating
- For multidog households, feeding each dog with complete physical and visual separation from each other
- Let your greyhound sleep in peace, occasionally tossing them a treat as you walk past if safe to do so
- If your greyhound is laying somewhere you don't want them to, call them to their own bed and reward them with 2-3 high value treats
- If your greyhound has grabbed something they shouldn't (e.g. the TV remote) call the dog to you and reward with a few high value treats, retrieving the item when the dog is busy eating
- Removing potential items of value such as always removing food from the counter and away in the fridge/cupboard, not having communal toys freely available in multidog households, etc.

Managing resource guarding aggression:

If your greyhound displays overt resource guarding, despite exercising the precautions detailed above, advice should be sought from a veterinarian with further training in behaviour. Behavioural modification can be conducted in conjunction with this treatment. The GAPNSW team may be able to assist with this and guidance on following the typical behavioural modification strategy for a dog displaying problematic resource guarding outlined below:

Step one:

- Take note of what items the dog guards or any instances where guarding behaviour appears. What your dogs does to show you they are guarding and how close you need to be before the behaviour appears. Note that when doing this be sure not to incite the behaviour

Step Two:

- Find something the dogs likes better than what it guards (high value treats or food e.g. some form of meat).

Step Three:

- If the dogs is in a situation where it would guard (it has its favourite toy in mouth), get some high value food that it likes. Enter the room and stop before the threshold at which the dog starts to display any resource guarding behaviour.
- Toss some food so that is lands in front of your dog. Wait for the dog to eat the food and then toss another piece.
- Repeat once or twice and then leave the room

Step Four:

- After a few sessions using step three move on to the next phase
- Repeat step three, except this time before you throw a treat, take one step closer to the dog.
- Toss food and then withdraw one step.
- Repeat and then walk away.
- During this phase note if the dog reacts with any stiffening and if so make a note to start further back or to take half steps when doing this again.

Step Five:

- Very gradually decrease the distance between you and the dog if the dog is responding well – meaning that the dog's body is loose and not stiff and there are no signs of guarding behaviours occurring when distance is decreasing.
- At this point it is good to note if the dog leaves their item and approaches you – this means that it has stopped guarding the item and is searching for something better.

Step Six:

- Once you can approach the dog and stand beside it, begin skipping the food toss until you are a few steps away and start thinking about slowly reaching towards the item.
- At this point you are working on forming new associations between your actions and how the dog reacts to it (this is known as 'classical conditioning')
- Walking towards the dog is different from reaching towards the dog and the item.

- Firstly bend towards the item, drop a treat and then straighten up. Repeat several times
- Gradually move your arm and hand closer and eventually work up to taking the item away from the dog and providing a positive high value reward.

Step Seven:

- Keep this process up and do it regularly, but within reason as to not overload the dog.

Disclaimer: note that this process is a training method to reduce the likelihood of aversive or aggressive responses when it comes to your greyhound and resource guarding. This should be undertaken slowly and if possible, under the direction of a trained professional. The GAPNSW team are always on hand to provide advice and support so please contact us if you have questions or concerns around your adopted greyhound and resource guarding.