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Aggression in Dogs – Food Bowl

How can I deal with food guarding behavior?

Some dogs continue to guard their food aggressively even after being worked with as puppies (see Handling and Food Bowl Exercises).

"Punitive attempts to change them tend to exacerbate rather than diminish the behavior."

Punitive attempts to change them, such as making the dog wait and perform numerous tasks for food, or factors that cause increased hunger might tend to exacerbate rather than diminish the behavior. In fact, while you should be able to remove your puppy's toys or food bowl and approach or pet your dog when it is eating or chewing on a toy, dogs that are possessive are more likely to increase their aggression if you keep taking away their food or toy and giving nothing positive in return. On the other hand, if you back off from a dog that is growling or threatening, (which may be prudent to avoid injury) then the behavior has been successful (see Aggression – Introduction, Aggression – Diagnosis and Overview, and Aggression – Family Members – Introduction and Safety).



"The dog should be fed a scheduled meal and not free choice."

The first step is to remove any conflict or anxiety from the feeding situation. You should pick up and put away the food bowl when it is not mealtime. The dog should be fed a scheduled meal and not free choice (although in rare cases free choice feeding may reduce arousal and aggression around the food bowl, but not the possessiveness of novel foods and treats). While you are preparing the food, the dog should be outside or in another room. The food is then placed in a secure location, preferably a room with a door that can be completely latched and/or locked or a crate (if the dog is accustomed to one). Locking the door is essential if young children are in the home. The dog is then placed in the room or crate with the food and the door is shut. When the dog is finished eating they often will bark or scratch at the door to be released. The dog is released and let outside, and while the dog is gone the bowl is picked up and put away. At no time should the dog be fed in a location where other people are present since this presents a danger to those in the vicinity of the dog while it eats. For some dogs, this will help decrease their anxiety and remove the source of conflict between the family and the pet, and may be the lifelong solution.

Can food bowl aggression be reduced?



In some situations, if the aggression is not severe and if the dog is not aggressive about an empty food bowl or when being fed by hand, retraining by a responsible adult can be attempted. This often entails measured and controlled feeding. Only a responsible adult should perform this exercise, and then only when the dog is wearing a leash and head collar. The leash and head collar are a safety measure, providing a means of additional control should the dog not respond to your commands or should aggression begin to emerge. The dog's daily ration is split into multiple portions. The dog is told to sit/stay and a small amount of food is placed in the bowl; then the bowl is placed on the floor

and the person steps back 2 to 4 feet. The dog is released from the sit/stay to eat this amount. Once the dog has consumed the food, he is told verbally to back away from the bowl, asked again to sit/stay and the bowl is picked up, repeating the process until the whole meal is consumed.

"Occasionally, a special treat can be added to the next portion of food."

Occasionally, a special treat can be added to the next portion of food. If at any time the dog stiffens or growls, the session ends and, once the dog leaves the bowl, it is picked up and put away.

Another option might be to use two food bowls placed well apart from each other. Have your dog sit and stay, place a small amount of food in one bowl and walk away to where the other bowl is located. When your dog is finished, have it sit and stay and then put food in the second bowl. If you divide the food into four to eight portions, you can move back and forth between food bowls, offering an occasional special treat in one of the bowls. Over time, if there are no signs of anxiety or aggression, the bowls can be moved closer together; finally, proceed to the single bowl technique described above. Training should eventually progress so that you are standing beside the dog while the food bowl is lifted and refilled (sometimes adding a separate treat). Again very small portions should be given and a head halter should be used to ensure success. Have the dog sit after each small feeding is finished, lift the bowl, add food or a treat, and return it to the floor before releasing the dog to eat. Finally, move on to slightly larger portions and try to get the dog to stop periodically while eating (with a verbal command plus the leash and head halter). When he sits, take the food bowl away, add more food and an occasional special treat and return it to the dog. It may not be safe to progress to patting the dog during eating or walking away and approaching, although under the supervision of a behaviorist, and with the use of a head halter and leash, additional progress might be possible. At no time should you confront or reprimand the dog; the session should merely end. If aggressive behavior occurs and it is necessary to end the session, offer the dog his food in confinement as described above.

"Do not use these techniques if the dog tends to lunge or attack as you approach."

One other technique that you might consider is to feed a small amount of food from your hand, and if the dog eats without showing any anxiety, then fill your hand again and repeat until you have fed him the entire meal. At a later feeding, you might alternate giving some of the food from your hand with dropping food into the bowl. At subsequent meals, place the food in your hand and drop it into the bowl, repeating this multiple times until the meal is finished. If the dog is comfortable with this procedure, you can then proceed to place a portion of the meal in the bowl with your hand, leave the bowl while your dog is eating and return when the dog is finished to fill with another handful. Occasionally add a small special treat when you refill the bowl. This technique can make some dogs very anxious and while they may eat the food, any sudden movements may result in an aggressive response. If an aggressive response occurs, this technique must be discontinued immediately.



If there is any possible risk during this type of training, having the dog on leash and head halter may help to ensure control and safety. If your dog does display any food bowl guarding, you should either ignore your dog until it is finished eating or remove the food bowl. To ensure your safety if you choose to remove the bowl, use a rope around the bowl, a stick or an “assess-a-hand” to test your dog’s response.

If a dog engages in food guarding behavior, you and your family should only eat food at a table to avoid food stealing and possible aggression at that time.

Do not use these techniques if the dog tends to lunge or attack as you approach the bowl or enter the room. If your dog shows this type of behavior, you need the assistance of a veterinary behaviorist for the retraining process.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM.

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