

Food Bowl Guarding

Contributed by Barbara Brill
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For dogs who exhibit aggressive behavior at their food bowls, my favorite resource-guarding protocol consists of several parts.

First: feed the dog its meal in a safe place where it will not be disturbed. If I need to put up doggie gates to assure peace during meal times, I will do so. Invariably with all the foster dogs I've cared for at home, this procedure alone has resolved lots and lots of posturing, warning growls and so on. Then after the dogs feel safe in their new environment, I begin to address the behavior problem.

Part 2. I start by placing the dog's food bowl in a location away from the kitchen counter. That area is just too filled with intense aromas, contains such things that are of extremely high value to the dog, that we refer to it as "hot."

Some of my clients' dogs have exhibited such strong territorial aggression around the kitchen that the owners couldn't even enter the room safely. Yikes! Then such a dog is to lose kitchen privileges. I want the owner to assume ownership rights in his or her own kitchen, not the dog.

After we mutually agree to a new location such as a utility room or a hallway to place the dog food bowl, and after the dog has grown accustomed to being fed its meals there undisturbed, then I begin to add the next element: the distraction of a single person moving very slightly, giving a slow underhanded arm gesture.

Part 3: Person moving just so happens to drop roast turkey or roast chicken tidbits. Another such favored treat, easy to "prepare," are frozen meatballs purchased at the grocery store. Then just take two or three from the container the night before the lesson; leave them in the fridge to thaw. Then cut up into small tidbits to use.

I like this part; it's purely classical conditioning. It's the simple pairing of two things: favored person + treats to eat. I begin with owner as first person to drop treats near dog's food bowl. I instruct the person to make no eye contact; to do no talking. Let me explain why. Some dogs who feel they

must safeguard their food bowls may perceive direct eye contact from a person to be a threat; a challenge to them. We don't want that. I suggest no talking so as to avoid adding a sound distraction while the dog is eating. Just drop meatball treats when walking by, or use an underhanded gesture to roll a small tiny bit of meatball toward the dog. Stay at least five feet away while walking slowly and tossing or rolling the tiny tidbit treats.

Repeat at the next meal time. I want the dog to gradually become relaxed, not guardy of its food bowl when a family member walks by. Remember to begin with an approach no closer than five feet from dog.

Part 4. Begin to prepare meals that are very tiny in volume. If normally feeding dog a ration of 1 and 1/2 C of food per meal, then measure out the regular quantity. Set it aside. Put only 1/4 to 1/2 cup of food in dog's bowl. Add 1/4 cup of food to a second bowl, but do not place the second bowl on floor nearby just yet. Give the dog the first bowl of food. After dog finishes and looks up for more, place second bowl about 5 to 6 feet from the first bowl. Then continue with the third and then the fourth bowls in the same pattern, one after the owner, until dog has received its full portion of its meal. Practice part 4 for about three or four days.

Part 5. Continue as started in part 3, but this time, place two or even three of the bowls down for the dog at one time, yet still spaced apart from each other. Then while the dog is scarfing down food from bowl one, toss a meatball treat or a chunk of cooked chicken into bowl two. Do this part without closing the social distance to the bowl. Human is still situated about 5 feet from food bowl. Practice, practice.

Part 6. Change the value of food item tossed into bowl two, three and four, to something other than chicken. For instance, it could be a cut-up turkey hot dog. The whole point is that the favored person is associated with good things appearing in the dog's food bowl. Whenever we use classical conditioning, it's a good idea to be patient, to offer many repetitions over a bit of time, such as days. So practice, practice. Do not add any other elements at this time.

Part 7. By the weekend, another family member is to join first owner during the "add treats to food bowl" exercise. No talking. No eye contact. No moving about. Stand still in one position without closing distance to dog. Do an underhanded slow toss into bowl 2, then into bowl 3, and then into bowl 4. Practice, practice.

Review: After this beginning, I'd stop to assess the progress with the whole family in a review lesson. Review the house rules: During dog's meal time especially, there is to be no running, no

shouting. It is not our aim to add provocative stimuli while dog is eating. Give dog peace and some social distance to enjoy its meal so that it will experience no stress, and no sense of competition for its food nor for its food treats added to the bowls.

It may well be that this simple added structure will help to resolve the food guarding. If it has not, then review with family, no feeding dog tidbit treats during meal preparation time. No feeding tidbits to dog from the table while family is eating. Also absolutely no interference with dog once it has lowered its own head to its personal bowl.

Part 7. Each time a new family member, or child in the family, is to begin this teaching plan, it's important to start over at the very beginning again to work through all of the steps. Do not rush the process. We want to avoid a set-back, so we move forward in a slow progression, step by step.

An aside: Most of the cases of food-bowl guarding that I have seen so far are from dogs who misperceived their owners' intentions. These dogs could have presented a danger to the family. It is for that reason primarily that I remove the dog's food bowl from the kitchen area entirely. But there's a secondary reason, too. During meal preparation, any one in the kitchen could drop a paring knife by mistake. I never want such a knife to fall into the face or eyes of a dog looking up, watching me closely. I don't want that to happen to your dogs, either.

Incidentally, I've found it amazingly simple to teach a very gentle lesson, called "Out of the kitchen." I use this lesson for times when I wish to cook or prepare meals. Simple rule: no dog in my kitchen while I'm cooking or preparing meals. They're so cute. They lie down on the dining room carpet facing the kitchen to supervise me.

Note in particular: If such a food-guarding dog exhibits other types of aggression toward any family members, then this whole plan will be revised to differ mightily. Please caution any children repeatedly not to crowd dog, not to touch dog, nor even to walk near dog while it is eating.

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