



DOG TRAINING SOLUTIONS

Food-Guarding Issues

If you've never seen a dog with serious food-guarding issues, it's difficult to appreciate the potential severity of the problem. Food-guarding issues are not necessarily a reflection on the personality or training level of the dog: it's an instinctive thing, and although dogs with a general aggression problem are naturally more prone to demonstrating the condition, it's also exhibited by otherwise-sweet, well-behaved, well-adjusted family dogs. Like an evil djinn, the problem can rear its ugly head only when food (or the food bowl) is present: a real case of Jekyll and Hyde.

A dog with serious food-guarding issues can be a real danger to anyone who should approach her during a meal: it's not a scenario in which you can expect to train your dog to "play nice". Instinct is what's compelling her to act in this undesirable, and even dangerous, way - you need to take steps to turn the behaviour around before your relationship with your dog suffers or somebody gets hurt.

THERE ARE DIFFERENT DEGREES OF FOOD GUARDING.

In the mildest case, a dog will merely tense up a little or freeze if somebody approaches her while she's trying to eat. She may even continue eating, but her posture will be rigid and stiff: she'll clearly be uncomfortable. Signs that the problem is more severe would include a marked increase in eating speed, a direct, hard stare right at you (often accompanied by a still, tense, "watching" posture), a lifted lip, a snarl, a snap, and finally a real bite. NOTE: A dog exhibiting any of these last three symptoms has a pretty severe case of food-guarding aggression, and may be prepared to inflict actual harm. If this is the case with your dog, hiring a hands-on trainer may be the best answer for you: it'll ensure your safety, and they'll be able to examine your overall relationship with your dog and see if there are other areas contributing to the problem.

A food-guarding dog is a pretty confused one. In her mind, she's got your role mixed up. She fails to recognize that you are the dispenser of food (which should accord you automatic alpha-dog status, ensuring your immunity from any kind of aggression or dominance), and instead is viewing you as a threat: a blackguard who might be going to take away her precious food. Hence, the possessiveness.

The degree of aggression that a food-guarding dog is capable of might be hard to understand, until you consider the fact that food is one of the greatest pleasures of your dog's life. Dogs are scavengers by nature: they're programmed to eat just about anything they can get their jaws around. As well as the instinctiveness of this gluttony, most dogs also simply enjoy the tactile and gustatory sensations that come with a good meal (or an indifferent one .. and sometimes even a bad one). They just ... like to eat. And it's this overwhelming importance that's placed on food that gets some dogs a bit mixed up: their grasp of the situation gets a bit thrown off, and they begin to wonder, miser-like, who might happen upon them and take away their cherished food. The obvious conclusion: you. Or anyone else who comes along at mealtime.

To cure her of this frustrating and antisocial habit, you need to remind her that you're actually the purveyor of that which she holds so dear: to make it clear to her that you're the one in charge of the kitchen, and of all the delightful morsels contained therein.

Dogs can develop food-guarding instincts at any point in their lives: some will have had the problem since puppy hood, but for others the tendency lies dormant until it's awakened by an item of particular juiciness. For most dogs, the deciding factor is meat, in some shape or form - whether it's a marrowbone, a mutton hock, or cast-off scraps from the dinner table. Meat to dogs is like money to humans: it can change them, make them do things they otherwise wouldn't do. So it's not entirely surprising that the intrinsic value of meat-related foodstuffs can give our dogs a new, unpleasantly skewed perspective on the sanctity of the food-bowl.

Because of the possibility of food-guarding becoming an issue in your dog's behaviour at any point in her life, prevention is obviously the ideal path to take: whether you get your dog from puppy hood or adopt her as an adult from a shelter, you should make a point of approaching her during mealtime.

Have you ever heard a friend with dogs ask you to "leave her alone when she's eating"? This is a short-term solution at most: it'll prevent anything untoward from happening, provided that all the humans play by the rules and ensure that they don't disturb the dog - but the dog is still the one calling all the shots. And what will happen if the unexpected occurs? What if a toddler charges full-tilt towards the dog and makes a playful grab for her bowl?

In a wolf pack, the alpha dog is never disturbed when he or she is eating. Not only does she get to eat first, and eat the lion's share of everything; but he or she also eats undisturbed. This is why a dog that's permitted to eat in solitary splendour can actually become more food-aggressive, not less; without anyone to take her down a notch, she begins to assume more authority than she actually has.

To prevent your dog from getting an over inflated sense of her own importance, make sure you disturb her plenty while she's eating. Don't make a point of tiptoeing around whenever the food bowl's out; it'll just accustom her to solitude and silence when she eats (which are things that only the alpha wolf or dog is entitled to).

At the other end of the spectrum, don't make these disturbances a negative experience for her either, or else you may actually create a problem where none previously existed. All you have to do is approach her from time to time while she eats - starting from the very day you bring her into your home - and add something tasty (and small!) to her dish while she's eating, to make the connection in her head that 'humans approaching food bowl = good news'. A spoonful of scrambled egg, a piece of liver treat, a few chunks of cheese - anything that she'll enjoy, and that has a greater "food value" than the kibble she's eating, will work perfectly.

Of course, if it's too late for preventatives and your dog already has a problem, you'll need to adopt a very different approach.

HERE IS WHAT TO DO:

- The dog bowl is going to be put away for the next seven to ten days. Over this time, you're going to be feeding your dog by hand - one small handful at a time. Yes, I know this is going to be time-consuming, but the alternative is even worse: a dangerous dog that can't be trusted around food. So feed her by hand for the next week or so. Be sure not to encourage any greedy snapping or grabbing for the food: only allow her to take the food from your hand when she does so gently. Remind her that bite inhibition is necessary to get what she wants!
- Once at least a week has passed and she's eating politely from your hand, you can reintroduce the food bowl, with one slight modification: it has to be

empty. And it stays empty until you pass by and drop a small handful of kibble into it for her to eat. When that's been polished off, wait at least a full minute before adding another, small, handful of kibble. Keep doing this until the entire meal's been consumed - this is a very effective way of teaching your dog to actively long for your presence near her food bowl!

- When she's graduated to the next stage, you can start setting down a half-empty food bowl for her. Don't let her lunge at the bowl and start gobbling: holding the bowl out of reach (or placing it on a handy counter), make her sit and wait before you allow her to eat. Don't put the bowl down until she complies. Sit or crouch beside the bowl and continue to add small handfuls of kibble, just as you did in step two, until a full meal's been eaten.

- The fourth, and final, step is to allow her access to a full food bowl. Again, it's very important that you do not allow her to call the shots: she must sit and wait until you release her with an "OK!" before she's permitted to eat. To keep the message clear in your head that you are in charge of the food in this house, practice calling her away from her food a few times a week and rewarding her with a super-tasty treat for her exemplary obedience while she's trying to eat.

If at any time your dog's behaviour gets shaky on any of these four steps, backslide until you've reached the stage at which she is 100% reliable. Wait at this stage for at least two or three more days before attempting to progress once more. As with any training, it's essential that a solid foundation is built before moving on to the next level - she must be completely comfortable with each step before trying a new one.

FURTHER READING

For detailed, in-depth information on canine behavioural problems (both preventing and dealing with them) take a look at SitStayFetch. It's the complete handbook for responsible dog owners, and is packed with valuable advice and step-by-step how-to's for dog training.

You can check out SitStayFetch by clicking on the following link:

<http://www.kingdomofpets.com/dogobediencetraining/?aff=cbdtsol608&type=nohop>