

FOOD GUARDING

By Deb McKean

(Undesirable behavior can be caused by many things, including undetected illness. No behavior modification program should begin without first taking the dog to a veterinarian for a complete physical examination. While you're there, give your vet a printed copy of this page and ask if it would be an appropriate technique for you to try. The NILIF program is an accepted standard in dog training/behavior but it is not, and is not intended to be, a substitute for an in-person, professional evaluation of your dog's behavior. This technique is intended for dogs in good health and of sound mind and stable temperament.)

Food is an issue over which sub-dominant dogs will argue with more dominant dogs. If, in the wild, dogs gave up their food to anyone (even higher ranking dogs) they'd soon starve to death. Most of the time lower ranking dogs will wait for the higher ranking ones to get their fill, and then they will eat. Sometimes not. Sometimes a lower ranking dog will fight for his share of the food, but will approach the higher ranking thief afterward with lip licks and much sorrow for having acted that way. He's not really sorry, but he doesn't want to get his butt kicked, he just wants to eat his own food. The fights happen most often over small kills. Imagine that you've not eaten for days and then you catch a rabbit or a mouse. Just as you and your grumbling belly are settling down for the feast your brother comes along and tries to take it away from you. Normally you'd be very respectful to your relatives, but you're very hungry! Your dog doesn't have the experience of hunting for his food, or being hungry for days at a time, but he does have all of the instincts and hard wired behaviors that come with all of the basic drives, including resource guarding.

So, what we do with our pet dogs is teach them that they don't have any food. We own the food and we not only let them have some on a regular basis, but we make it pleasurable for them to temporarily give up what we give them. There is no need to frighten or intimidate your dog into giving you his food. You can get him to voluntarily (and happily!) let you have anything you want.

GROWLING

A growl is a warning. It means "stop what you're doing or things could get ugly". Some dogs take years to work up the confidence to actually follow through with a bite; others only need a split second. Take all growls seriously, but don't punish for them. The most you're going to accomplish by being aggressive towards a growling dog is to teach him not to warn before a bite. You might decrease his confidence enough that he won't bite you now, but don't count on next time. The only way to use aversives to permanently change behavior is by making the aversive very strong and very severe. Not only is there no reason to do that, it's not a humane or ethical way to change your dog's behavior. The other thing that happens when you get aggressive with a growling dog is that you add a negative to the presenting situation and add additional fear to any subsequent situations. In other words, you started with a dog that fears his food will be taken away. By being aggressive towards him when he protects his food you add additional fear that he'll be attacked for protecting his food. The next food guarding situation that comes up is going to be twice as nasty because there is double the fear or anxiety.

By being aggressive towards him when he growls you're telling him that he wasn't aggressive enough to ward off an attack. Dogs will usually go out of their way to avoid conflict and keep aggressions on a low

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level. Growling, as odd as it seems to humans, is an attempt to avoid aggression; it's a warning that things could get messy, so please back off. If the growling doesn't work (he gets attacked and/or his food is taken from him) he'll be the one to escalate the aggression the next time. Unfortunately, the next time could be with someone else who is taken by surprise and reports that the dog bit "without warning and for no reason!"

Dogs aren't able to say, in words, "Hey! Don't do that! It makes me afraid (or nervous, or anxious)". They use body language and vocalization to get their ideas across. Think of growling over food as your dog's way of saying "I am hard wired to believe that if you take my food I will starve to death, please don't push me into a fight over it". Your answer is going to be "No problem! I am going to take control of this situation and change your mind and make you want to give up your food".

Practice this technique one step at a time. Be patient. You might be singing the first verse for days or you might be able to get to the second verse in one sitting. Don't rush it. The slower you go, the more permanent the change in behavior is going to be. Even if it takes weeks or months to get to verse three, that's a very short time compared to the next 10 years or so of living with a dog that you can trust not to injure someone over food.

If your dog seems to tense up or you have any inkling at all that he could bite you during any part of these exercises, don't do it. I don't know your dog as well as you do. This technique is designed for dogs who are basically well behaved and don't have dominance confusion issues -- in other words, the ones who are growling only because they are food possessive.

THE DOGGIE FOOD RAGTIME BLUES

First verse:

Start with a hungry dog. Give him a small breakfast and work at dinner time or delay his meal until he's hungry. Put just a few pieces of kibble in the bowl. Have the dog sit, then put the bowl down and walk away. (The "sit" part is important.)

Chorus:

When he's done he'll come looking for you to ask "Hey! Can I have more of that please, huh? Can I?" and you'll say "Of course!! You are such a goooood dog!"

Second verse:

Pick up his empty bowl, put a few more kibbles in there and tell him to sit. When he does (don't tell him twice) put one hand on his neck or back and with the other hand put the bowl down for him. If he starts eating while you're still touching him, great! Walk away.

Repeat chorus.

Third verse:

Pick up the bowl, put a little bit of food in it and remain standing. Tell him to sit and hold the bowl out for him. If it's a small dog you can squat down, but don't bend at the waist or hover over him. Don't put

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the bowl down. He'll look at you as if you're nuts. That's OK; since you're a dog person he's probably right. If he's hesitant encourage him to eat while you're holding the bowl. Praise softly while he's eating.

Repeat chorus (except he doesn't have to find you, you're right there).

Fourth verse:

Put a few more kibbles in the bowl. Hold it out for him with one hand and put your other hand on him in the same spot you did during the second verse. How's he feeling? If he's just too nervous to eat with your hand on him, remove it. If he's OK with it let him finish while you're still touching him. Repeat this verse as often as it takes for him to be comfortable with the idea.

Fifth verse:

Put a few more pieces of kibble in your hand and put your hand in the bowl. Hold the bowl with your other hand and have him eat around your fingers. Warning: You will have food crumbs mixed with dog spit all over your fingers.

If all went well, alternate verses three through five, for half of his meal, for as long as it takes for him to feel really comfortable with the whole thing. For example, at one meal give him half of his kibble while your fingers are in the bowl and the rest he can eat by himself. For the next meal keep your hand on his back or neck while he eats the first half, leave him alone for the second half. It should take less than a week of doing this for him to get the message that there is no need to guard food. Don't make meal times a neurotic, unhappy time for either of you. Take things slowly. Do only as much as you're both comfortable with and make sure at least part of his meal time is stress free. If you hit a stumbling block, go back to the level where there was comfort and stay there for a few meals.

Now it's time for the glory hallelujah choir to take the stage. You've been singing the first part of this song to teach him that nothing bad happens when you're near his food. He's going to sing along with you on this last verse because you'll be teaching him that very wonderful things happen to dogs that willingly surrender their food.

Final verse:

If all has been going well do exactly what you've been doing, but now say his name while he's eating (to get him to look up), tell him to "sit" and then toss something very yummy into his bowl. Cheese or a piece of hot dog works well. Right before you toss the yummy give your action a name. I say "yummy time!" It will only take a few repetitions before saying "yummy time!!" will result in your dog responding with an automatic sit and pleading eyes that say: "Here ya go! Take my bowl! I love yummys!!"

In case I forgot to mention it, he must sit for every meal and every yummy. The reason the "sit" is important is that we need to underscore the idea that you own all of the food in the universe and he has to do something for you to get some.

When he has the hang of the word and the activity progress to saying "yummy time!" and then placing it in the bowl, don't toss it. When he's very comfortable with you putting your hand in the bowl to add a yummy, begin removing the bowl to add the yummy. Don't dawdle! We don't want to cause anxiety; we

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want to teach him that if you take his bowl away you are going to return it immediately with better stuff than he had before.

IMPORTANT: The yummy should be something that is only eaten from his bowl and only appears during a meal. Don't use something that he'd normally get as a hand delivered treat, such as milk bones. The only way, the only time, he gets this particular type of food is when he gives up his dinner to get it. You can change yummys if you want; from cheese to roast beef, for example, as long as the new yummy is not something you're going to give him in any other context.

Congratulations! What you now have is a dog that has developed a conditioned response to a verbal cue. It's the same principle of learning that Pavlov proved with his bell. In an emergency situation, such as a baby crawling toward your dog while he's eating, all you need to do to avoid disaster is announce in a happy voice "yummy time!" You may not have a yummy readily available, but the cue, all by itself, will cause a conditioned response in the dog that something very good is about to happen. Get the baby first, and then give the dog lots of yummys and tons of praise. A wonderful side effect of this is that he may readily assume that a child near his food means extra special rewards. Don't test or train for this though, it's not worth the risk. As soon as the baby is safely removed from the area, and the dog is enjoying his well deserved yummy bonanza, get a rolled up newspaper and smack yourself severely while repeating "I will never leave a dog and child unattended".

As far as strangers, children, etc., are concerned, my position is that my dog is entitled to eat his dinner in peace, so I train the humans instead. But, I still want a dog that will tolerate the clueless among us. A good thing to do with kids is to have the kids feed the dog little treats once in a while, but the dog has to "down" for these, not sit. This will teach him that even children are owners of the world's food supply and that submission to children is a good thing.