

BOUND ANGELS

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Solving Food Aggression

Understanding why a dog has food aggression issues is the first step to solving the problem in a fair manner.

To a dog, food is the ultimate resource, much like cash is to a human. If someone steals your money you can't buy anything. Conversely, dogs can't buy food, so if you take their food away, they are stuck. Some dogs, in particular ones that come from shelters, may have serious food aggression issues. This is because food is in short supply, and if they were kenneled with another dog, that dog may have won out the battle for food. Since dogs need food to live, they will fight for it with their lives. If a dog has food aggression issues, it is something you will want to address straight forward, and sooner rather than later. People make the ultimate mistake when they let food aggression go and think it will "work itself out." *It doesn't!* Once a dog has food aggression issues, it's a downward spiral unless you're willing to do the hard work to help your dog. If you give up on your dog, rest assured of one thing, no one else is going to be able to, or want to solve the issue. So more than likely, giving up on him, is signing his death certificate. He knows you, he trusts you, and we will use this relationship to our advantage and teach him that he doesn't need to be aggressive for food, or anything else for that matter.

Food aggression with dogs can be related to other dogs and to humans as well. If properly handled, this article will cover the work to solve the overall concept in the dog's mind.

Food Aggression Toward Humans:

In order to solve the mental confusion in the dog's mind we need to make two things very clear to him:

1. You have the food and you control the food.
2. As long as he's good, there will *always* be food.

It is not a good idea to try to handle food aggression by taking food away from a dog that is being aggressive. That is to say the old "putting the plastic hand in the bowl" method is really stupid and unfair to a dog. The reason is because this logic is counterintuitive to the dog. It's better to *not give the dog the food in the first place. Sound like the same thing?* It's not. If I put a food bowl down and reach for it and the dog snaps, and I then take the bowl away, the dog's action was justified. In the dog's mind, you were trying to take his food, he snapped to protect his food and then you took it away, so he was right:

When someone reaches for the bowl, they really are trying to steal my food, so I should bite to protect my food.

The dog must be clear that you control the food **before** you give it to him. In canine behavior the leader dog eats, and when he walks away, he rarely comes back and pushes the others out of the way because he wants more. Using this logic, we will provide food to the dog in small increments all the while creating a bond between the dog and us.

Dogs that have food aggression issues should be fed in a methodical way. The single best approach is to begin with a hand-feeding regimen. That is to say, everything the dog gets to eat comes from my hand. Let's break this down simply: The food is given to him in small amounts from my hand. The bowl is not near the dog, my hand is, and he only sees my hand as delivering the food. If he tries to circumvent my hand to go for the food, he doesn't get any. Don't correct the dog at this point, simply move away and show him the food available to him is in your hand. Reload your hand while he is chewing on the food you just gave him. Waiting until he's done chewing and then reloading, steers him toward the bowl or bag containing the food. We don't want this; his focus is to remain on us, our hand that contains the food.

****** A professional should handle dogs that are so severely food aggressive that they will attack you to get to a bag of food or the bowl. In these cases we often opt for feeding a dog through a crate or barrier. The techniques described here will address dogs that become aggressive when you *reach for their food*.

Do not do this exercise with other dogs around or other food bowls on the floor. It's just you, the dog and the food. I call this *learning without distractions*. The distractions will come later; right now we need to be fair & clear to the dog. Feed him a few kibbles at a time, or if you're raw-feeding a small amount of the raw food. This regimen takes time, *take your time* and have patience. It is the patience that you exert that teaches him patience - and it also teaches him to not behave stupid. When offering the dog his food, be cautious not to jerk your hand away. Present your hand with the food in it, open your hand palm up and let him take the food from your hand, then slowly and deliberately reload your hand. I try to make a habit of bringing your hand toward the dog. This further teaches him that we are delivering the food and he does not need to aggress to get it.

Once your dog begins taking the food from your hand over a few days, you can begin making him wait for the food and even begin dropping some food into a bowl beneath him. This action will teach him that your hand moving toward a food bowl is an action that delivers food, not a negative one that takes his food away. We want to teach our dogs that our hand moving toward a food bowl is a good thing. Once the dog is clear that he is going to get fed, he should begin to lose his aggression. Remember, what he is protecting, he is protecting because he thinks it's valuable. Once he figures out there is always more, it will lose its value and he will calm down. The other thing he will figure out is that **you** control it, not him. His deference to you will teach him structure as well.

I have faced this issue on several occasions, especially with raw food and raw bones. I have fixed this by holding the bones for my dog while he chewed them. Once he had taken a few bites off of the meat on the bone, I placed the bone down and walked away. Over time he saw that my hand was no threat to him and he relinquished his position and aggression to the food. Now I have no issue taking raw bones out of his mouth. I do not suggest you try that.

Food Aggression toward other dogs:

Dogs that exhibit food aggression toward other dogs should be broken down into two categories:

- Those that walk away from their bowls to steal another dog's food.
- Those that become aggressive when another dog approaches their bowl.

Both are wrong, but the first is more wrong. Neither should be tolerated.

To begin with, dogs that show any food aggression toward other dogs should be taught that this behavior moves them to the bottom of the ladder and they are fed last. By seeing everyone else eating first, they learn that their place is not up for negotiation. When restricting the dog from eating, you'll need to keep him restrained so that he doesn't try to sneak in and get food from the others; this is easily done by keeping him on a leash while the others are eating. If he tries to pull toward them, tug on the leash and give him a calm NO. When everyone else is finished, they should leave the room and you can put his bowl down and then allow him to eat. Do not give up your position. You control him. Giving up and just saying "whatever," will land you in a heap of trouble. His aggression will escalate. If you're certain that the other dogs present are well trained enough where they won't bother him, you can leave them in the room. I would also encourage you to make the dog sit and wait before allowing him to eat. This will teach him more about structure. I don't tolerate dogs that push over me to get to their food. One exercise I do with my dog is place the bowl down and then I leave the room. I expect my dog to wait until I give him the OK command to eat. Just because it goes down, doesn't mean it's his yet. In the same respect, once it is his, *it is his* and I don't act like a jerk and take it away. Because I am this fair with my dog, *if* I have to take it away, he's not going fight me for it.

Dogs that leave their bowl to go to another dog's bowl must be corrected immediately. When training food issues I suggest letting the dog drag a leash or a long line so that you can easily get him without having to grab his collar (and inevitably get bit). As soon as the dog leaves his bowl, I give him a verbal NO. Assuming you've taught your dog the NO command, he should stop to look at you. When he does, you direct him back to his bowl, either with a signal or by use of his leash. If he insists on continuing, I give him a physical correction on the leash following the verbal NO. If he still insists, I remove him from the room and remove his food and he doesn't eat. Remember, if he moves away from his bowl, he's done. He will learn that he must focus on his bowl and not the bowl of someone else. At the next feeding he will have the opportunity to try again. After a few tries, even the toughest dog will learn. Do not make the mistake of taking him to another room and feeding him. Provided your other dog(s) don't have food aggression

issues, you can easily teach the “problem” dog with a small amount of work. If your other dog(s) have food issues too, you probably have not done any work in teaching structure to your dogs. It is your job to protect your dogs, so do not subject your dog to getting bit by being sloppy. Corrections, whether physical or verbal, should be delivered calmly... *that means no screaming.*

Most dogs can be corrected / retrained with structured feedings. Some dogs require physical corrections; it will depend on the severity of food aggression the particular dog shows and how clearly you can teach your dog. I remind you that some of the most severe aggression a dog will exhibit is over food, so be careful. At the very first signs of food aggression you must take control. Physical corrections should be done fairly and calmly but instantly. Once the dog moves off of his bowl he should be corrected. Once he approaches the other dog's bowl, it's too late. It is your job to keep him at his bowl. You are his leader - take this role seriously. And take it seriously because if you don't fix this it is a death sentence for your dog. One of the hardest things to deal with is food aggression especially if it escalates to a place where two dogs are aggressive towards each other. *It almost never works its way out.* Catch it early and you'll fix it, let it go and you'll lose a dog.

An important thing to remember is that the person who is doing this training should be a professional or the primary care giver of the dog, never a housekeeper, child or stranger. This is about building upon a relationship with the dog, which makes the training fair.

Dogs that growl or snap when another dog approaches their bowls are not *as* wrong as the dog that purposely wanders over to another dog's bowl. These are the bullies. I suggest you teach your dog that his food bowl is his food bowl; he is not to approach another dog's food bowl while there is a dog eating out of it.

A dog protecting his food with a warning is acceptable but not preferable. We will want to address this issue by teaching the wandering dog first, as instructed above. If another dog is simply walking by the bowl and the dog that is eating becomes perturbed, we will want to teach him two things: One is that we don't accept aggressive behavior for the sake of aggressive behavior, and TWO, most importantly, the other dog will not try to take his food because we are there to maintain order in the pack. And because of that, the dog is not allowed to growl at the other dog.

Using the techniques above is generally enough to get most dogs into line to understand structure. I suggest that you be vigilant in the use of a long line or at least a leash on the dog you are training. When it comes time to correct the aggressor, do so in a fair but firm manner. The punishment should fit the crime. When it comes to aggression (and other methods don't work) I am in favor of physical corrections for the simple fact that if you don't correct them from being aggressive to one another, they will try sort it out themselves - this is the very worst thing you can have happen. It is better that you sort it out for them, that is the job of the leader. I do not advocate physical corrections for training dogs, but I do for combating aggression in these type situations. I've dealt with hundreds of dogs with severe aggression issues and would caution you against allowing

this behavior to continue after the first time you see it. Nipping it in the bud is not difficult if you catch it early on, let it go and you've got a nightmare on your hands.

In my home there is no aggression toward food, toys, people, other dogs, places, nothing. I do not tolerate it. Yet I run my house in a very casual manner. My dogs are allowed on my furniture, they get lots of love and attention, they can basically do as they want as long as they understand that I control the house, and when I've had enough, it stops. We play and have a great time and there are no issues. All of this is as a result of fair training and a good relationship with my dogs.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:

<http://www.boundangels.org>

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