

Dinner Time
by Marcia Albert

“He’s a great dog in every way, but he’s a little skittish if people get too close when he eats.” I heard that the other day from a friend of mine. Then I watched as she put the food dish down and left the dog to eat. This fellow hovered over his food and gobbled like crazy. Every two seconds his eyes darted around the room, and then he threw in a low growl just for good measure. SKITTISH????? How about seriously possessed?

Dogs, by nature, are not big on “what’s mine is yours”. Their philosophy runs along the opposite track: “What’s yours is mine, what’s mine is mine”. In addition some dogs are very serious about guarding their possessions, and then others are much more relaxed. Although there are two situations where guarding is most likely to occur, during eating and during play, this article will focus on food guarding.

When a dog is eating treats, meals, bones, rawhide, pig ears he can be very wary of any person, animal or other dog coming close. I’ve found that many variables influence a dog’s reaction: what is being eaten (value), who or what is close (stranger or friend, child or adult, kind of animal), where he is (confined, unusual area), the activity level surrounding him (different voices, confusion, motion). As you see, a dog may be fine when eating his regular meal, but very watchful when gnawing on rawhide. Or he may be very edgy when the cat walks by and calm when the other family dog saunters in. The other thing that varies is the degree of aggression. Some dogs glare or canvas the area with wide eyes; others pack a full blown terrifying attack on an approaching person or animal.

How food aggression is handled depends on the degree of aggressive behavior, but regardless, your dog’s food aggression must be addressed. If your dog is in the glare, gobble, growl category don’t make the mistake of saying “Just leave him alone”. Your staying away proves to him that he is successful at keeping you away. In his mind, he feels that he is top dog and has the right to keep good things to himself. Things will only get worse.

To reverse the glare, gobble, growl guy the following may be helpful. Understand that changing your dog’s attitude about his food will take time and practice. As an owner you do the exercises with him. **Under no circumstances should children ever do food bowl exercises with dogs. This is responsible adult work.**

Hand Feeding

Each of the following steps should be done for one to two weeks before moving to the next. If the dog begins to revert to any of his negative habits you’ve moved too fast. Return to the previous step and stay there for longer.

Always have your dog sit or down before you feed him. This sets the tone that says you are in charge. Also, please do not make the mistake of letting your dog have free access to his food. In order for your dog to understand that you are in control and his leader he must see that his survival is dependent on you because you provide the food. You must GIVE him the food, and when he has finished you remove the dish.

- Dispense with his dish and feed him a little bit at a time from your hand
- Put his dish on the floor and put some of his food in your hand. Let him eat from your hand while your hand is in his dish.
- Put his dish on the floor and drop a few pieces at a time into the dish. Wait a few seconds after he's finished the last piece, and then add a few more pieces.
- Place half of his meal in the bowl. When he finishes that add a piece of something that he absolutely loves, let him eat that, and then put the other half of his meal in the bowl.
- Place half of his meal in the bowl. When he finishes that call him over to you and give him something he absolutely loves. Then put the rest of his meal in his bowl and let him finish.
- Place all of his meal in his bowl and as he is eating offer him something special from your hand.
- Once your dog is polite about his food make certain to maintain the food bowl exercises. Every day either feed him a bit of his meal from your hand, drop a tidbit into his dish or interrupt him by calling him and offering him something scrumptious from your hand.

You can help your dog to practice self control by teaching him that if he waits something good will follow.