

Dog Training Articles
By Beth Bradley

Food Aggression

We are now in the era where our concern for our new dog or puppy is to be sure he or she is not food aggressive. I will attempt to explain the reasons for food aggression but I will not explain how to re-train your dog. Why? Because each dog is an individual, what I may do with one dog for food aggression, may not be the same thing I will do with another. I will explain what I do when raising a puppy so to be sure he or she does not grow up to be food aggressive, but if your dog is food aggressive, I recommend that you get in contact with a good trainer who can work with you in finding the best solution for your dog and his problem.

Why food Aggressive?

Some dogs have a very high food drive, and by definition that means that they love to eat! If this puppy is born into a large litter then the food drive is going to be exacerbated to the point that the dog is going to be frantic when he eats because his competition is large. This problem is not alleviated once the dog goes into his home with his human family. The habit of pushing his way to the meal and eating fast is still embedded within him.

Then, a human tries to slow the puppy down when it is eating by petting or soothing and that makes him more frantic. The human thinks picking up the bowl will slow him down but it makes the situation worse. The puppy will then begin to show more stress at mealtime. Obedience training needs to be started and the owner's alpha position established in order for the dog not to become food aggressive.

In addition, in a large litter, sometimes the smallest or weakest puppies do not get their share of milk and food. They struggle during meals and then when finally placed in their human homes they don't have to struggle. Most humans don't start obedience at a young age so this puppy develops confidence that he never had with the litter and figures now, no one, including Alpha Human is going to challenge him for food.

I have also seen some young dogs that have worms or other health issues, which are causing them to starve from the inside. No matter how much food they are given, they cannot get enough to satisfy their growing bodies. Furthermore, many training manuals say that the owner should be able to take away food from their dog while he is eating. Inadvertently they are removing the bowl from a *starving* animal, further adding to his aggression.

Creating a Monster:

I truly do not believe any dog is born food aggressive towards humans; I believe it is a man-made trait created by bad advice from so called experts. The idea of taking food away must have been developed from 'old school control freak' trainers who needed to prove to themselves and their dogs that they were master.

How to prevent Food Aggression:

When I have a puppy that is a fast eater or exhibits signs of food aggression, I develop a program of obedience. I want to make sure this puppy walks properly on a leash, without pulling, and can sit and stay, on the leash. Once the puppy is doing that I first instill that the puppy will sit and stay while I place his bowl in his designated eating spot; of course I'm holding the leash taut so the puppy can't bolt to the food. The puppy must hold the sit and stay until I release him to his food; which is about one second.

Generally, I am standing next to the bowl when the puppy is released and while he is eating. I say nothing to the puppy while he is eating; I just stand there next to his food bowl. Unbeknownst to the puppy I have his most favorite treat (hot dogs, liver treats, cheese, etc) in my hand while he is eating, once the puppy is done eating and gives me recognition for being there, I give him the treat from my hand. This goes on for several days until the dog is eating and immediately nudging my hand for his hot dog.

Once the nudging begins I take this to the next level. Same thing, sit and stay, leash in my hand, place the food down at my feet and release the puppy to it after a couple of seconds now. While the puppy is eating I drop the hotdog or treat into the bowl (don't worry if it hits his head and falls on the ground). I drop small pieces (nickel size) at a time so the puppy can enjoy and look forward to another helping. I continue to do this slowly placing my hand closer to the puppy's bowl over a period of days or weeks, until I am actually placing the food into his bowl. The puppy's tail is usually wagging a mile a minute now. This way, the puppy sees a human's hand coming to the bowl and immediately thinks that he is going to get something better than what is in the bowl!

If the puppy is still eating too fast, I will feed the puppy in a non-tip bowl but I turn the bowl upside down. I fill the bowl with food upside down so the puppy actually has to turn his head sideways in order to get the food out of the bowl. It's not as easy for the puppy to eat this way and it naturally slows him down.

Conclusion:

I feel this is a great way to teach any young dog or puppy that hands near the food is a good thing not a bad thing. Maybe, once in a blue moon, I will actually pick up the puppy's bowl. In doing so, I have already taught the puppy to 'come' when called and I actually call him away from his food, give him a treat, place him in a sit and stay, and then I return to his bowl but it is only to drop a handful of his favorite treats and then release him to eat again.

I want my dogs and all dogs that I train never to be afraid that I am going to take food away from them. I never want to create stress around mealtime because that is going to just lead to health issues down the road.