The Happy Dog Training Academy

Food Aggression

**Food Aggression in Adult dogs over 16 weeks.**

While behavioural consultations are not the strong suit of most general Veterinary practitioners, there is still basic advice you can and should give your clients regarding food-bowl aggression. Here are six tips for helping food bowl aggression for concerned clients. There are some old ways witch I have been told and tried, that are simply far too dangerous or have less chance of working, as asking your dog to make their own dinner will.

**Let sleeping dogs lie, and eating dogs eat**

Avoidance is a good idea regardless of the family's choice for structured behaviour modification or not, Dr. Albright says. This situation, the family may find avoidance the best policy (feeding behind a physical barrier and not messing with the dog during mealtime). If there are children involved, feed the dog behind a closed door to avoid incident. The clients may feel this is all that is needed to keep everyone safe and happy. Aside from some exceptions with a new dog or puppy that may need to learn that food is not a scarce resource, never free feed a dog with food-bowl aggression. If the food is there all the time, then the dog may feel the need to continually guard the resource, says Dr. Albright.

Avoidance really is not a solution, just masking the problem will not change the dog’s aggressive tendencies and could well lead to more severe problems in the future. We are human and mistakes can be made, when you just don’t pick the bowl up from the floor in time, and your child goes to close.

**Don't mess with the puppy's bowl**

Many trainers and vets have recommended messing with the puppy while he is eating (such as taking the bowl away several times), to help desensitize the puppy to these actions from humans. I would advise against this because it could actually condition the puppy to think that people around his food are unpleasant. Repeating an action over and over again doesn't always result in the animal learn to tolerate an action. It could do the opposite of helping the puppy “get over it.” While a dog with a tolerant personality is likely to allow your messing with them while they are eating, in general dogs don't like it, and it isn't a good practice. Clients may inadvertently be creating an aversion to people approaching the bowl. We should be advising clients against poking and prodding a dog while eating. It may help to tell clients that messing with a dog's food bowl when he is trying to eat is like somebody messing with your plate or patting your head when you are trying to eat dinner. Nobody likes that.

**Does competition make it worse?**

A[2014 article](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/canine-corner/201411/easy-way-prevent-food-aggression-in-dogs)in *Psychology Today* explored the idea that competition for food between a litter of puppies fed from one food bowl could cause food aggression. If one or two puppies got less food, that could set the stage for more competition at the next meal and teach the puppies to eat fast and possibly show aggression. One solution could be to offer more bowls of food than there are puppies to reduce competition. Anecdotally, while this might help prevent food-bowl aggression, hunger isn't the only driving factor. We do not really know why dogs develop food-bowl aggression. We can assume genetics and early learning (like every behaviour, or disease for that matter) predispose an animal to food aggression. Competition for food among puppies in a litter may be a part of it, but it is probably not the whole story.

**Labels are for canned goods**

When it comes to labelling the type of aggression, I think the label is less important and teaches that to my students. Whether it is territorial, dominance, resource guarding or possessive aggression, the type of aggression present doesn't really matter when using a reward-based approach to treat the problem. What matters is that the dog doesn't like something. He thinks that thing sucks. Reducing the suck factor is best accomplished through reward-based training (not always treats-It can also be through affection, toys and sometimes distance, etc.).

**Here are Six ways, I personally use for desensitising Food Aggression.**

**1, Make your dog work for Food.**

Dogs love to work and food rewards, gain trust. By giving your dog the opportunity to work for food, not only builds trust between you and your dog but also gives you the opportunity to train. Put the normal dog food into their bowl, I use a big serving spoon, give the dog their command “sit, down, wait etc”. Once you have the dog in the sit or down. I spoon some food either onto the floor or into another previously empty bowl. And repeat using a different exercise each time. This gives you the opportunity to train, but more it allows the dog to see you putting food into the bowl. You lose none of your alpha status as the dog is rewarded for the behaviour. The dog has no reaction to food and bowl. There for no aggression.

**2, Hand feeding**

Hand feeding, taking a bowl of food and holding it off the floor. Take a small amount and feed to the dog. By taking it from the bowl the dog can see you taking food from there bowl. This may take a few days to master, to desensitises the dog. One thing to mention is this is really only for mild food aggression.To prevent and solve the food aggression you can start hand feeding your dog. This will improve your bond and show your dog that you are the source of food.

You can also control how fast your dog will eat. You don’t have to feed them the complete meal, just a few times before and in between will be enough.

After a while, you can also try to take away his food bowl while he is eating just for a second, so he learns that nothing bad happens.

Advantages of handfeeding,

* Builds trust
* Ability to control pace of eating
* Dog focuses on you instead of guarding

**Trading food.**

By trading the food bowl, for something the dog can value more. In this method you are trading, by putting the food in the bowl and putting it down for the dog, allowing them to eat a few mouth full’s. You will then take a wooden spoon with something like peanut butter on, then you are going to trade it for the dog’s bowl. By trading up from the dog’s normal food to something that is more valuable, your dog will leave the food and you are able to take the bowl. In mild aggression you can use your hand to take the bowl. If your dog has mid to full aggression you can extend the wooden spoon, and use a brush to move the bowl, as time elapses and your dog accepts that moving the food bowl, is not taking it away you can reduce the length of the spoon and use your hand to take the bowl. You are only going to move the dogs bowl a few inches, at the beginning, lengthening as the dog becomes accustomed to the bowl being moved. Remember each time you shorten the spoon or brush you are to return to the amount of time and length the bowl is moved.

**Feed and stroke**

Put small amounts of food in the dog’s bowl, while holding another bowl of food. Watch the dog at a small distance, when they have finished praise and walk back to the dog patting them as you put another small amount of food in the bowl. As they start to eat again pat them on the back and walk away. Repeat when the dog has finished each small amount of food. Reducing the dogs stress levels. As time go’s and you feel confident, you can move the pat into stroking and from the back of the dog to its head. Some dogs can have what is known as afraid food aggression. Where the dog feels threatened as they lower the head to eat the food, this exercise helps the dog with the stress levels, you may also rase the food off the floor, for even smaller dogs.

**1 for you 2 for bowl.**

This is probably the metred I myself prefer to use, because it gives you the opportunity to show the dog with food that you are not threat to his food bowl Because your able to give treats to your dog, it is a very easy to do. You need a good hand full of do food “dried is best” holding then in a jumper or apron, give the dog one, place two in the bowl, don’t allow the dog to eat out of the bowl. Give the dog one more and another two in the bowl. Repeat until you have none. The taking the food out of the bowl, keep repeating over and over until you have none. Keep repeating the exercise daily.

**How To Stop Food Aggression In Puppies.**

If you want to learn **how to stop food aggression in puppies,** you're not the only one.

Because while we'd all like to think of our puppies as sweet innocent bundles of joy that can do no wrong, the truth is that dealing with behavioural traits like aggression can be a little shall we say, overwhelming.

But does this mean you should give up hope and let your pup set the rules in the kitchen? In a word definitely No.

Thankfully, food aggression in puppies can be relatively easy to solve with the right plan of action.

The trick however with most things’ puppy-related is…

* Figure out why it's happening
* Establishing pack leadership
* Consistency

Now, before we get into the do’s and don’ts of stopping food aggression, first a quick heads up.

Dealing with any type of aggressive behaviour starts by first teaching your puppy how to remain calm and in control of their emotions.

Because if you can ultimately teach your puppy to be calm, they'll be less likely to act out in any situation that triggers their aggression.

So, before you do anything else, find out from the breeder if they have worked on food aggression, the puppies mum will have taught her puppies from day two, how to behave when feeding. But sadly, most breeders do not carry this great work mum has done once it comes to weening the puppies. Simply just throwing a tray of food into a litter will only teach the puppies, that the more aggressive you are the more food you get.

**What Is Food Aggression In Puppies?**

The actual term ‘food aggression' can be a little misguiding as it implies that the puppy is going to fight and demand food.

In most cases, it is actually best understood by considering it as a defensive or protective behaviour with the underlying threat of aggression.

Say for example you lay out, your puppy's bowl of food and then try to take it away. Rather than passively accepting your decision without question, they instead snarl and bare their teeth. In the worst cases, they may even go to bite.

Should your dog exhibit any of the following characteristics when feeding then it is time to be on the lookout for potential food aggression such as

* Growling (with or without eye contact) when someone comes to close.
* Snarling at other dogs who try and encroach on their bowl.
* Adopts a ‘frozen' and on edge posture when eating.
* Makes a snapping motion at you when removing their bowl – even if they do not actually bite.
* Eats especially fast and immediately looks for more food when their own bowl is empty.
* The whites of their eyes are especially pronounced.

You will be able to tell a puppy exhibiting signs of such aggression pretty easily.

Even if they still have their ‘baby' teeth, do be careful as they can bite pretty hard and at such an age will likely not quite have figured out the difference between a nip and a snap.

Don't worry though, it is surprisingly easy to train that little food fiend out of such antisocial behaviour,

Just like any other aspect of puppy training, the necessary place to begin is by understanding what causes some pups to behave in this manner in the first place.

**What Causes Food Aggression in Puppies?**

So why do some puppies so aggressively protect their food when there is no threat that it will be taken from them?

The answer to this question basically comes down to canine nature. A puppy will be taught by mum that you have to take your turn when feeding, she will move puppies away with her nose, when the puppy has either been fed or is getting to aggressive. Mum will feed like this from the start. She will teach all her puppies’ patience. After only a few weeks the puppies will play with each other establishing dominance over each other, for the want of a better work pack leadership. Although it is really just finding out who is the bigger, stronger puppy. At around 5 weeks mum will start to ween her puppies, in the wild dog. The adults would feed, each puppy by regurgitating food, of course I’m not suggesting breeders should. But should mimic the behaviour by giving each puppy an amount of food separately and not allowing the puppy to feed from a litter mate’s bowl, by simply putting a hand between or Infront of the puppy at this age would teach the puppy, the human is in charge as the alpha would be in the wild dogs. Even that tiny ball of fluff retains some aspect of the pack mentality. This is basically the food equated to survival, so when a puppy is defensive over their bowl it is because of that retained natural instinct.

Sticking with the pack theory, there is also the fact that before domestication dogs simply did not know where or when their next meal would be coming from. It could be the same day, but more likely would-be days later, many miles away and involve an energetic pursuit and kill.

Lacking the energy to keep up or contribute to the hunt would simply move them even further down the dining pecking order. So, missing just a single meal or even worse having it taken/stolen away, could make the difference between life and death. Should the pack leaders not hunt successfully again for days. In most carnivores feeding once or twice each week was not uncommon. With sometimes vast areas of travel in-between.

**How do we know this for sure?**

Well, much as some dog owners may scoff at the sheer notion that some dogs are still hardwired for the pack mentality. There is clear evidence that proves this still today. Take a look at some of the countries where feral dog packs are still common in both urban and rural environments. It is clear that there is an established eating order regardless of who claims the kill. And that order is Alphas always dine first. Even packs that are clearly full to bursting will defend leftover carcasses from other scavengers as of their lives depended on it.

This is because, from the dog's perspective, food supply is the most important thing in the world. While there may be a world of difference between a scavenger dog and your suburban fluff-ball, they share that common principle and defensiveness towards their food.

**But why do they defend their food from those who supplied it?**

This is a common question, and one that humans can struggle to comprehend. One of the main reasons for this is the fact we tend to humanise our dogs when in fact. From their perspective, your family is their pack. No dogs do not see humans as dogs they see us as providers, companions. While they will be happy to be subservient to the Alpha (you) who supplies the food, protector, leader their attitude towards everyone else is up for question. Have you ever wondered why some dogs are doting and loving to some members of a family, yet seam less compliant and less affectionate for others? It is because these family members have not established themselves as above the dog in the pecking order.

The same is true when other dogs come to ‘visit'. Watch your dog's behaviour, one of the things they'll do after establishing a friend is to go check that their bowl is empty, just in case it is stolen.

So, while the family may provide the food, they only care immediately for the one who hands them their bowl. Sure, there are many other ways whereby Alpha dominance can be earned, but food supply would be placed at number one on most dog behaviouralist’s lists.

**Other Reasons for Food Aggression In Puppies.**

There are many reasons why dogs may exhibit food aggression as youngsters. Some breeds are naturally predisposed towards defensiveness, it's why they were domesticated in the first place. For example, German Shepherd, Rottweiler, and Doberman puppies are almost always going to exhibit some signs of aggression. Working that out of their ‘programming' is one of the first considerations when setting about early training these breeds. But the problem can manifest itself in all breeds, and it is never safe to assume that your otherwise placid pup will not become a little monster at dinnertime.

Even puppies can be prone to early onset PTSD. If as we have said the litter was particularly assertive or aggressive. Many rescue puppies, especially those saved from especially traumatic circumstances, will often exhibit nervousness around their food supply. By rescue we don’t mean puppies found in rescue kennels, it may well be from a bad breeder or even family home. It is natural for them to subsequently defend as they deem appropriate.

Likewise, do not rule out the outside chance that your puppy may be experiencing pain while eating and is therefore, more prone to out of character aggression. In puppies, this is usually due to gastric issues or possibly teething problems. While possible, unless there are any other overt signs of distress, save yourself a trip to the vet until you have tried the following guidelines to eliminating your puppy's food aggressiveness. However, if you see your puppy arching there back or pawing at the mouth, seek veterinary advice.

**So, let’s look at how to Stop Food Aggression In Puppies.**

The first step to take when it has become apparent that your puppy is displaying food aggression characteristics, is to establish the severity of the problem.

Are they solely defensive around food, or does that extend to possessiveness over toys, sleeping/resting spots, or even other dogs and people?

If the latter appears to be the case, then the dog is either displaying what is termed ‘resource guarding' or even worse, displaying insubordination to the Alpha (you).

Either way, you need to take the lead here.

A fearful dog prone to snap over food anxiety needs to be reassured, an ambitious or ill-disciplined dog needs to be reminded carefully who is boss.

In exceptional cases, (and we're talking one puppy in a thousand) where the puppy becomes immediately aggressive to the point of attacking people who even step into the room while they are feeding. It is sensible to immediately consult local behavioural specialists. With this condition a dog trainer is not qualified, and a specialist needs to be contacted.

It's important to understand that at no stage of this training should anyone be at risk of being bitten. No one should show aggression to the dog, doing so will only increase the problem.

Assuming that your puppy is otherwise mellow and non-aggressive, we're seeking to establish three things with this training.

1. Desensitize the puppy to the presence of other people/dogs when they are feeding.
2. Form a positive association between people and their food.
3. Train out specific food aggression behaviours by providing incentives.

**Desensitizing Your Dog**

In the overwhelming majority of cases, your puppy is going to become aggressive due to the proximity of others to their food bowl.

Therefore, we need to slowly work towards lessening this distance without causing your pup to exhibit any of the warning signs listed at the top of this article.

We do this by ignoring the dog entirely and going around our business while slowly inching closer to the feeding area.

This stage should not berushed, take it gradually and work at it over a couple of weeks.

Just stay distracted by making your own breakfast, chat with other household members anything which the pup will interpret as non-threatening towards their food bowl.

Just try and keep it standardized and consistent (which is why making breakfast is a sensible choice).

The idea is to get within a couple of yards over the next few weeks. If this is impossible without your dog snarling, barking or displaying aggressive body language then it may be time to consider calling a professional. Chances are that the puppy will be displaying other anti-social tendencies, and these need to be ironed out ASAP otherwise you will end up with a difficult adult dog.

But let's not give up just yet. Try the following first

**Use Treats for Positive Reinforcement**

As far as your puppy is concerned, that bowl of food is essential for their survival. Only one thing is going to potentially lure them away from it that is an even tastier treat.

While performing the above method, casually toss occasional treats that will land just far away enough for them to have to leave their bowl unprotected. Make sure they are irresistibly better than their standard food.

They will swiftly notice what you are doing and that there seems to be an unlimited number of those treats available.

All they need to do to enjoy more and more of them is to come ever closer to you and leave their food bowl unguarded.

Once they have figured out that even after a tasty extra nibble that their primary meal is not going anywhere, chances are that they will considerably mellow out.

How far you wish to stretch this is up to you, but it does also present a perfect opportunity to make your puppy comfortable eating out of your hand.

Once your puppy is happy with this, you are well on the way to eliminating that food aggression.

So, it's time to step it up a little.

**Remove & Replace The Bowl**

We're now working on the assumption that your dog is willing to eat treats from your hand.

But be aware that they do not understand the concept of “do not bite the hand that feeds”.

Assess your situation carefully before attempting this and only attempt it if you can stand right next to your dog while they eat and there are no signs of aggressive tendencies.

Start by lowering yourself onto your knees and gauge their reaction.

From their perspective, this will be unusual, but ideally, we are looking for them to carry on with their meal.

Very carefully put your hand on the bowl and lift it up as you straighten back to a full stance. Your dog will wonder what is going on but hold it for five seconds and then replace it back on the floor. Next mealtime, try this twice and leave it ten seconds before replacing. Then try it three times and twenty seconds during the following meal. There is no need to go any further than this (you don't want to make them unduly angry). Any longer and your dog will not be comfortable. The dog needs to understand that it is up to you to decide what happens with their food, just as importantly, that there is nothing to fear.

**Make Them Work For Food**

It is easy for puppies to become complacent. After all, as far as they are concerned life is all about food, play, and the occasional nap. In some circumstances, this can lead to the accelerated prominence of unwanted behaviours including food aggression.

Most experts will agree that it is better to simulate the pack mentality by making your pup ‘work' for their meal. Key to this is exercise. You should avoid feeding your puppy before walking (it can cause dangerous bloating) and make sure that the exercise is just the right side of ‘more than enough'.

Your dog ought to be tired when they get home, and hungry. But keep your hands off that puppy’s bowl, now you feed yourself and your family. Your dog will be extremely hungry and waiting for its share down the pecking order.

Once everyone has dined, give them some positive love, and feed them.

Combined with the exercises above you will be reinforcing in your pup's mind your control over when and how much they eat. It is unlikely they will ‘play up' to risk their share, and consequently, they ought to be less aggressive around feeding times. Just remember that if you have more than one pup to treat both of them equally and keep a lookout for any thieving or bullying.

**Final Thoughts**

Food aggression in puppies can quite easily be worked out providing it is caught and acted upon early. Early socialization is where your pup figures out the rules, and as creatures of habit they will quickly learn what they can and cannot get away with. Keep mealtimes and even more so the rules always consistent and ensure that all members of your household are aware of them.

Your pup will come to realize that their new pack is pretty darn good at hunting, so much so that they are always going to get their share of the hunt.

Do not read too much into breeds when it comes to food aggression. Many people will tell prospective owners that some breeds are more prone to food aggression, but it is simply not true. Moreover, it is the breeders, that can prevent aggression in puppies. Looking for the right breeder is probably the most important thing you can do.