

ask the trainer

By Sharon Harvey

While eating, my dog stiffens and growls if I reach for his food bowl. I can stand next to him and pat him but he won't let me move for the bowl until he's done. I've tried punishing him and I've tried backing off, but he seems to be getting worse. Can I fix this?

This is a common problem and can often be resolved without professional help. However, if your dog has bitten or he leaves his bowl to come after you, you should consult a professional trainer who will come to your home.

When your dog stiffens and growls, he's warning you to back off. He may offer a number of signals to communicate that he's feeling threatened. Examples are increased eating rate, freezing, growling, showing teeth, snapping and, if all else fails, biting. For the most part, dogs do NOT make mistakes with their mouths. Dogs who bite and puncture or tear skin have a worse prognosis than those who have learned to inhibit their bite. Training is most successful in dogs who present multiple, clear, gradually progressive warnings before they become offensively protective.

Neither punishment nor walking away is an effective strategy for modifying this behavior. Punishment creates a negative association between you and the food bowl. Eventually he may not even let you approach. Walking away only reinforces his behavior... you did just what he wanted! The best strategy is to create a new, positive association between you and the bowl.

Based on your description of his behavior, the following training schedule assumes that your dog will not guard an empty bowl, become threatened by your approach, or dislike being touched while he's eating. Stay at each step for several meals, even if he's doing well. Never move to a more challenging step unless he has shown no signs of guarding behavior at the current step.

Prior to each meal, measure out his food and put it in a separate bowl. Feed him in a place where he won't feel cornered. During

training, you will give him his meals one, small handful of food at a time. Have him sit in front of his bowl to earn every mouthful. Praise him whenever he's eating without showing signs of guarding. Do not push him to the point of failure as this only allows him to rehearse his undesirable behavior.

Step 1: Drop a small handful of his food into his bowl and allow him to eat. Do not reach for the bowl while he's eating.

Step 2: Place your hand on the side of his empty bowl for a few seconds, then add a small handful of his food with your free hand. Don't move the hand holding the bowl until he has finished eating that portion.

Step 3: Place your hand on the side of his empty bowl and move the bowl around for a few seconds, then stop and add a small handful of his food with your free hand. Don't move the hand holding the bowl until he has finished eating that portion.

Step 4: Repeat Step 3, but continue to move the bowl while he's eating. Start with barely noticeable movements and gradually increase how much you move the bowl.

Step 5: Repeat Step 4. Continue to move the bowl for a few seconds, and then pick it up and IMMEDIATELY

reward him with something even yummier than his food. When he's 100% successful you can allow him to eat his meals without interruption. Randomly test him at this step to make sure he doesn't regress.

After all of this, don't be surprised if he starts sending you dinner invitations!

If you're having a problem with your cat or dog, call the Rescue Village HelpLine at 440.338.4819, ext. 13 or send an e-mail to askthetrainer@geaugahumane.org. We'll help you solve your problem or refer you to someone who can. The most frequently asked questions will find their way into the Rescue Village Reporter's Ask the Trainer column or onto Q104's Ask the Trainer radio segment that can be heard on Sunday's Wilde & Fee Morning Show during the 8 o'clock hour.

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