

Resource Guarding & The Food Bowl Game

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Resource guarding is natural behavior. Sharing is a learned behavior. You will have to teach your dog that if he “shares” he will get what he wants. There are two places that resource guarding is likely to happen: 1. eating meals, bones or rawhides and 2. playing with highly treasured toys (which includes your underwear, socks, table napkins or tissues from the trash!)

Food bowl guarding: If your dog guards his food bowl then you need to implement the “Food Bowl Game” This is a self-control exercise that is easy to teach because your dog is so motivated to get what is in his food bowl. You'll need your dog's food bowl with at least 10 pieces of something really good and smelly to eat. The goal is for your dog to stay sitting while you lower his dish onto the floor and to wait until you release him to eat.

1. Start standing up facing your dog with his food bowl in one hand and covering the top of the bowl with your other hand in case he jumps up to get it. No free treats!
2. Ask your dog to sit then start to lower his food bowl. If your dog stands up and or moves toward the bowl stop lowering it - lift it up so the dog can't get it. Have your dog sit again. If he sits, give a treat from the bowl so he knows he can earn a reward for cooperating.
2. Start to lower again, stop and give treat just before your dog moves. Watch your dog he will be obvious about this. You want him to succeed. If he gets up again just stand straight and say "too bad". Ask your dog to sit. If he still wants what you have, don't give another cookie (we don't want him to think this part is the game). Once again start to lower the dish and make sure you reinforce him for staying in a sit. Just reinforce from the dish with your free hand (take piece from the dish).
3. By the sixth or seventh time your dog should be waiting while you are lowering the food dish and not diving into it. What a wonderful way to link good manners to something your dog wants without any scolding, pushing, pulling or correcting by you. Your dog is learning that he can control what he earns by exercising self-control.

Once your dog will stay sitting while you take your hand away from the dish on the floor:

1. Place the bowl on the ground, stand up straight and move a few steps away from the bowl. If your dog moves, get back to the bowl and lift it off the ground. Repeat till you can move a few steps away, come back to the bowl, and then if your dog has held position and given you eye contact – walk to him and give him a piece of food.
2. Return to the bowl, move away from it return, and walk over to your dog (if he has held position and made eye contact, and deliver a treat.
3. Return to the bowl, stand near it, and when you get full eye contact, pick the bowl up and walk the bowl to your dog, put it on the floor and release him to eat from the bowl.

Don't ever release your dog to move from position and run to the bowl to eat. You want the dog to believe that holding position and making eye contact is what makes his human bring the food to him.

If your dog has ever growled at you when you come near him while eating, follow the above sequence. Be sure when you get to the point where you can put his dish on the floor only a very few pieces of food are in the bowl. When he has eaten the few pieces start to reach for his dish to add a few more pieces. As you reach to add food to his bowl, your dog should back up to let you put the food in. If he dives for the bowl remove your hand and put no pieces in the dish.

Each time you move your hand to drop in food, pull it back as soon as your dog moves forward instead of staying back. As before he doesn't get more until he is polite and waits for you to release him.

An extension of this exercise/game is to have your dog sit/stay letting him see you have his bowl of food, which you then take to another room and hide. Return to your dog and then release him to go find his bowl to eat. The "hide the food bowl" game becomes two training exercises in one session - it teaches self-control, and it also becomes a scent game.

Self-control cannot be imposed on any animal. It develops when the individual (dog or human) sees a positive benefit coming to them by waiting rather than acting on impulse.