

"Don't touch my food!"

What to do when your dog has food issues

FAQ:

Why was this handout given to me?

During a behavior evaluation, the dog indicated he was uncomfortable with people around his food. He did NOT bite or try to bite, nor did he show concerning behavior with non-food items.

How does the program work?

We begin to condition the dog to associate people near his food bowl with good things like treats.

Is this dog cured?

The dog is no longer showing discomfort, but it is best to continue the program. This is an easily manageable behavior but it could return if he becomes uncomfortable again.

What if I have other pets?

We always advise animals be fed separately from each other—either on opposite sides of the room, in different rooms, or even closed securely in their crates.

Is this dog safe around kids?

Dogs and children should always be supervised in any situation. Older children may participate in this training with your direct supervision, but remember that a dog's behavior when guarding its meal is not a representation of how that dog will interact with children in other situations.

You need to understand that your dog has a bad habit that animal behaviorists call Food/Resource Guarding. It's not an alarming issue, but it is one that needs careful management. The program is simple—teach your dog that people approaching the food bowl is a good thing! Here's how you'll do that:

Step 1: Hand feed your dog his entire meal, one handful at a time. Warning! Your hands will get very sloppy! Go to step 2 when your dog is comfortable—you want to see relaxed muscles, a loosely wagging tail, and a happy, wiggly body.

Step 2: Put a little bit of kibble into the dog's bowl at a time; just enough for a few bites. While the dog is eating, drop a small (the size of a quarter or less) bit of a yummy treat near the bowl. Hot dog, cheese, or chicken are great for this! Repeat until the kibble meal is gone. As your dog gets comfortable, move your hand closer to his bowl to give him the yummy treat until you're putting it

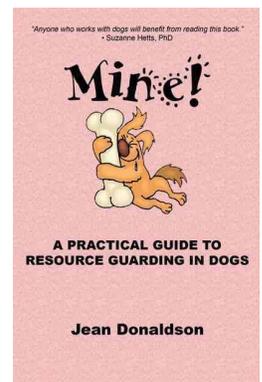
directly in the bowl. Do not move closer until the dog is totally comfortable—again, you want your dog to be happy about your approach, not to tense up, tuck his tail, or appear nervous at all.

Step 3: Put about half of the dog's food in his bowl at a time. Add your yummy treats to it at regular intervals while he is eating. Praise him when he stops eating to look at you.

Step 4: Ask your dog to sit while you put down the full bowl. Release him to eat with a cheerful "okay!" Sometimes drop yummy treats into the bowl, and sometimes call the dog to over to you to get a yummytreat. Praise him each time he stops eating.

Note: Your dog should be comfortable within a few weeks, assuming your dog's regular meal is dry kibble (and unless a vet has told you otherwise, it probably should be) and that you only progress to the next step when your dog is very comfortable. If at any time your dog appears uncomfortable—his

eyes get wide, tail stops moving or tucks under, mouth tightens up, or his muscles appear tense at all—go back at least one step until he's comfortable for a few days before going forward again.



Our suggestions are based on advice given in Jean Donaldson's brilliant book "Mine! A practical guide to resource guarding in dogs"—buy your own copy for more detailed plans.

What about the rest of his day?

- Praise the positive, don't punish the negative.
- Don't correct your dog for freezing or growling. These are warnings your dog gives when he's uncomfortable, and reprimanding that teaches him not to warn you next time.
- Use food as a reward when your dog is being appropriate! Make him work for his food—ask for a sit, down, or other trick and pay him well for nice behavior.
- Don't hesitate to contact the MD SPCA or trusted animal behavior professional immediately if you see a return or increase in worrisome behaviors.
- Enroll in a training program—it's fun for you both!



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