

PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING DOGS WITH AGGRESSION INVOLVING FOOD, RAWHIDE, BISCUITS, AND BONES

This handout is designed to help you understand how problem behaviors involving food develop and how to avoid incidents of aggression. This handout discusses the two groups of dogs for whom behaviors around food are often misunderstood:

1. new puppies who are not yet exhibiting any problematic or worrisome behaviors around food and
2. older dogs who are exhibiting frank and troubling behaviors associated with food.

This handout also discusses the special case of puppy mill/farm dogs who never had enough food or the right nutrients, and the difference in handling aggression when given food toys versus meals.

What Dogs Eat

Myths about feeding dogs are almost as numerous as myths about dog behavior. Dogs are omnivorous, but with strong carnivore tendencies. This means that they may choose meat, but will also opportunistically supplement their diet with fruits, berries, and herbs. If given the chance, dogs will scavenge. Although scavenging is a public health problem in cities, it is interesting to note that scavenging garbage is one of the major ways wolves find food in some areas of Europe!

Because of the perception of dogs as obligate carnivores many people think that their dogs **must** have bones or rawhides, pigs' ears, pizzle sticks, cows' hooves, et cetera. It is **not** necessary for dogs to have any of these food treats for the dog to be well nourished; however, most dogs will value these treats. How much they value items like bones depends on many factors: their prior experience, their ease of access, how the dogs have historically been fed, social factors in the household, et cetera. These factors can contribute to these types of food items being valued and protected. When dogs protect food treats they can become aggressive. Food-related aggression may be restricted only to very special treats like these, may occur only occasionally or consistently, and may be directed towards humans or other animals.

“Resource Guarding” and the Special Case of Food

Food-related aggression is often lumped under the category of “resource guarding,” but most dogs who react aggressively in the presence of some class of food do not inappropriately guard or protect other “resources” (toys, humans, beds, et cetera). In fact, the concern here is that “resource guarding” can commonly be viewed as a variant of normal behavior, or as a management-related problem that will respond to basic training. True food-related aggression is pathological and poses safety concerns for some households.

New Puppies Without Problematic Behaviors Involving Food

Feeding and Nourishing Pups When They Are Still with Mom

Puppies should learn early in life that they do not have to compete over food. This means that when the pups are first

experiencing semisolid food (3 to 5 weeks of age) they should be fed from multiple dishes, or ones with central wells that help disperse the pups, ensuring that one pup does not control all the food.

- If one puppy is becoming a lot fatter than the other pups, or one puppy is a lot thinner than the others, breeders should be suspicious of behaviors at the food dish that may facilitate unequal feeding patterns.
- In extreme cases, plump, pushy puppies may need to be fed separately so that they do not learn to control access to food.
- Thin puppies may need more protection at feeding time or may simply need more food. Puppy metabolisms can vary and good breeders understand that they have to meet the individual puppy's needs.

Problems with Pet Store and Puppy Mill/Farm Puppies

Pet store and puppy mill/farm puppies (and virtually *all* dogs sold in pet stores in the United States *are puppy mill dogs*) are seldom fed in a manner that prohibits competition for food. Puppy mill/farm and pet store puppies are almost never assessed to see if their individual needs are met. As a result, puppy mill/farm and pet store puppies may be over-represented in the population of young puppies and dogs who may have been food or nutrient deprived and who worry about having access to food.

Research shows that deprived puppies, like puppy mill/farm puppies, may have received inadequate nutrition *in utero* and in their first 2 months of life, resulting in impaired brain development and greater behavioral reactivity. If you know that you have adopted a puppy mill/farm or pet store puppy, please ensure that you feed them a high-quality puppy food that has been supplemented with docosahexanoic acid (DHA), the fatty acid that is most often lacking in their early diets and feeding strategies.

Please remember that these puppies usually are forced to compete for less-than-adequate levels of food. Once adopted, by feeding them often, even with small amounts of food, you can teach them that food will be available when they need it. For those young pups who hover over a food dish—empty or full—because they are so worried that they will miss their feeding opportunity, keeping a small amount of kibble available in a large number of locations may help them to learn that they do not have to worry that food will disappear. Obviously, if this strategy worsens the puppy's aggression or causes other pets in the house to eat too much, this intervention will not work for you. Instead, consider offering numerous, very tiny, protected meals throughout the day

How Often Do Puppies Need to Be Fed?

Frequent feedings are best because puppies will learn that when they are hungry there will be enough food. Puppies should be fed approximately 4 times a day from the time they start solid food through 5 to 6 weeks of age, then at least 3 times a day through 12 to 16 weeks of age, then at least twice a day through adulthood. Feeding an adult dog twice a day gives structure to the dog's day, allows the dog to eat on a schedule that approximates the family schedule, and allows

the dog to be fed less food at once, which may improve the health of some dogs.

Additionally, some dogs who have relatively mild concerns about whether they will have enough food become more reactive when hungry. Feeding these dogs 2 or 3 times a day reduces their reactivity.

Recent research on canine brain development supports allowing the puppy to stay with the mother past the time when the mother is ready to wean the pup, which occurs somewhere in the 6- to 8-week range. Puppies continue to benefit from the nutrients provided by their mother's milk and by the social and learning environments she provides through at least 8.5 weeks of age.

Treats or Bones and Puppies

Once puppies are successfully eating solid food, they can have treats or, in some cases, bones. If puppies are given treats or bones, all puppies must be included. Puppies must be monitored and sometimes separated so that they do not fight. Treats/bones should never just be thrown into a group of puppies. No one puppy should be permitted to control access to all the treats or to all food, or to threaten littermates to get access to treats or food. If puppies are given fewer treats/bones than there are puppies, the pups will fight over the treat/bone. Research shows that if there are fewer bones than puppies, puppies structure a "hierarchy" by fighting over the bone. This is exactly what we do **not** want to encourage with our pets. *Puppies who do not have to fight for food, bones, or treats spend more time in play and social behaviors, and do not learn to hone their fighting skills in the presence of food.*

Teaching Puppies to Sit for Their Food and to Be Calm While Eating

No puppy who is old enough to be adopted is too young to learn to sit (See **Protocol for Deference**). The *earliest* a puppy should be adopted into a new home is between *8 and 8.5 weeks* of age. Being allowed to live with their brothers, sisters, and mother through 8 weeks of age makes puppies more socially stable, makes them easier to house-train, improves their immunological health (they fight infections better), and allows them to respond to new environments with less stress and fear. Puppies as young as 4 to 5 weeks of age can learn to sit for a few seconds for a food treat, and excellent breeders take advantage of this. *Breeders* should start to request that pups sit for treats and for feedings at this age.

Having dogs sit for all food and treats will accomplish three things:

1. The dogs will start to learn to be calm before eating and when they want anything—the food dish is not going to come down until the individual dog is quiet.
2. The dogs will learn that physically contesting each other for food does not work, and, in fact, is associated with not getting the food.
3. Breeders can shift problematic coalitions either by preferentially feeding in a certain order, or feeding in a random and changing order. If there are no problem aggressions within the litter, feeding in a random and changing order is preferable because then the dogs will learn that humans are reliable and will feed them whether they are fed first or last.

Feeding the Puppy in His New Home

Once in his new home, the puppy should be taught to sit for all food treats (rewards for behavioral protocols, biscuits, and bones, et cetera). Puppies should learn to "wait" before the dish or treat is placed in front of them. Puppies have short attention spans and should not be asked to sit or wait long, and they should never be forced to sit. As they mature, they can be asked to wait for increasingly longer periods of time, but starting with 1 to a few seconds is reasonable. The easiest way to do this is as follows.

- You should ask the dog to sit.
- As you pick up the food, say "sit," and once the dog sits, say "wait." The pup only has to wait a second or two. If you do not know how to teach a dog or puppy to sit, please read the handout **Protocol for Teaching Cats and Dogs to "Sit," "Stay," and "Come."**
- As you put the dish/treat down say "okay," a signal that tells the dog it is okay to get up, and leave the dog to finish. If the dog gulps food, you may wish to hold the dish while the dog eats, frequently asking him to "sit" and "wait" while you add a bit more food so that you can help him to eat more slowly.
- If the puppy becomes excited every time the dish is slightly withdrawn, even if empty, only small amounts of food should be placed in the dish at any one time, and the dog should have to calm slightly before getting the food. Refilling the dish frequently but with tiny amounts will give you the opportunity to repeat the "sit, wait, okay" sequence frequently, and will help the puppy to reinforce his own appropriate behavior in response to these requests. Because the dog gets food when he complies with your requests, he will learn them quickly.

After the dog learns "wait" you can start teaching the dog to sit and to allow you to take the dish—whether or not the dog is done eating. This can be important because at some point you may need to get the dog's dish back while there is still food in it. The easiest way to do this is to hand-feed the dog the small amounts discussed above, and say "wait." If needed, you can *gently* restrain the dog by placing a hand softly on the chest. Move the dish away for a short while, get the dog to look quickly up at you ("Magda, look!"), and then **quickly** say "good girl" and **reward the dog with the food.**

What If the Puppy Worries When You Take the Food Dish?

If the dog has problems with waiting—and a problem is anything from wiggling and not looking at you to growling—teach the dog to sit and wait for an empty dish. Practice taking the dish and giving it back frequently at intervals that vary from a few to 30 seconds. Then, once the dog is perfect, start to add food to the dish. At first let the dog lick a small amount from your hand while your hand is in the dish, then add the food directly to the dish, always practicing "wait" and taking the food away, finally working up to the point where you can take the dish from the dog using the requests "sit" and "wait" when the dish contains food and is on the ground.

If the puppy still growls or becomes very worried about you taking the food or dish away, consider feeding the dog undisturbed, in a protected place. Puppies who become agitated when you have done nothing unkind to them may have had very awful early experiences, may have been

undernourished *in utero*, may not have had the right kind of food early in life, or may be developing some problems. *By struggling with them, you will only make them worse.* By protecting them, you may gain their trust and help them to learn that they can rely on you.

Puppies and New Types of Food Items

Remember that new food items are naturally desirable, and a puppy who has been wonderful for presentation and removal of puppy chow might not be so wonderful for the presentation and removal of boiled chicken. Anticipate such problems and only offer tiny amounts of new food in the manner recommended above.

Older Dogs

Aggression When Food Is Present

Food-related aggression is a problem with some dogs. When a dog has food-related aggression, the dog guards their food, treats, rawhides, and/or real bones from other dogs or from people. Some dogs will guard and become aggressive when given any amount or any type of food, and others will become aggressive only when given something that they really value (e.g., a lamb shank). It is not unusual for dogs who are not aggressive when fed their routine meals to show aggression regarding special treats or foods and food toys.

Food-related aggression can be associated with other problem aggressions, but is a valid diagnostic category on its own.

If your dog is only aggressive around food, but does not challenge or become aggressive to you or someone else in other contexts, please do not assume that the dog's response to food is not problematic. Any inappropriate or undesirable canine aggression can cause a person to be maimed or killed. The presence of food is ubiquitous in our life and may be a particular problem for children who either carry food with them or who smell like food because they eat so frequently. Your choice is to either treat the food-related aggression or to manage it. Ignoring it is not a safe choice.

For many people, and especially for those with children in the house, deciding to manage rather than actively treat any food-related aggression can be a sane choice that will render your pet safe and loving.

Managing Food-Related Aggression

Food-related aggression can be quite variable.

- Some dogs will begin to growl softly as soon as they sense a human approaching and increase the intensity of their growl as people approach.
- Some dogs will growl while shaking and gulping their food.
- Some dogs will stare at anyone who is within their view while they are eating and snarl.

The safest resolution for all of these behaviors involves the same strategy: **if possible, feed the dog where he is undisturbed.**

Why Should We Suggest Leaving the Dog Undisturbed?

Food-related aggression may be tightly coupled to survival skills that have been honed over years of evolutionary time and treating it *safely* may be something that requires more effort than the average person is willing to expend.

Not treating the aggression IS NOT the same as ignoring it. A conscious, conscientious, and responsible decision to **not** treat food-related aggression means that:

- The people involved understand that the behavior is abnormal, undesirable, and dangerous.
- They do not wish to work with the dog to change the behavior.
- They will avoid eliciting the behavior at all costs so that they are safe and so that they do not help the dog to reinforce the undesirable response.

The decision to not treat food-related aggression, as described above, is an active, conscious choice. This is **not** the same as tolerating a dog who growls when he is fed. If you tolerate the growl, you are actually passively reinforcing or encouraging the inappropriate behavior. Dogs, like people, hone their skills every time they are allowed to exhibit a certain behavior, even if this behavior is inappropriate. If you do not wish to actively teach the dog a more suitable behavior than aggression in the presence of food, *or* if you cannot or are too afraid to work with the dog, you must ensure that you and the dog avoid all circumstances in which the dog will become aggressive.

How Can We Avoid Triggering Aggression Associated with Food?

Practicing avoidance of any situation that would trigger the food-related aggression includes the following steps:

1. The dog is fed at discrete times from a dish and is either kept sequestered until the dish is placed on the floor, at which point the dog is given access to the food **and** the humans leave, **or** the dog is asked to sit, stay, and wait until the dish is put down. The dog does not approach the dish until released ("Okay!") **and** the humans leave. Some dogs are fine when people are present, but react aggressively when other dogs or cats are present. They, too, must follow this first step.
2. The dog is **never** fed from the table or fed scraps when food is being prepared.
3. The dog is **always** behind a barrier (a locked gate, a locked door, or in a locked crate) when people are eating or preparing food. Yes, this **does** mean that the dog is banished from the family barbecues; however, this is safer than permitting the dog to be present.

Please remember that the anxiety level of the people will decrease dramatically if they are not worried that the dog might bite. If people are stressed or distressed because they are concerned about the potential for a dangerous event to occur, they will have little patience for the dog and will be less understanding of the dog's special needs. Put the dog in another space and do not feel guilty.

4. Any treats (dog biscuits, table scraps) must be placed in the dog's bowl, in a room where the dog is undisturbed, and must be of a nature where the dog can finish them in one session. Being able to finish the treats or special food in one session is particularly important for dogs who guard food. If you know that your dog hoards and protects biscuits, even biscuits may be deleted from the dog's repertoire unless the dog can finish them within a few minutes of being given them. This is essential if the dog hides his biscuits in sofas, et cetera, because you will not know where the dog has stashed his treats and

will inadvertently be victimized by his hidden caches of food.

- Some dogs respond aggressively **only** to **very**-high-quality treats such as bones, rawhides, pig ears, pizzle sticks, cow hooves, or chew sticks. If these **cannot** be finished in one setting (and most cannot), the simplest, easiest solution is to remove them from the dog's repertoire **forever**. This is not cruel, injurious, or deprivation for the dog—it is good common sense. Yes, the dog is forbidden to experience something that other dogs have and that he would find enjoyable; however, this cost is small when compared with the guilt you would feel if a child's skull were crushed because the child came between the dog and a bone. If dogs inappropriately protect food items, people must be responsible for insuring that they do not set the dog up to fail. This is a particular risk when small children are involved: even if the dog is behind a closed door with a rawhide, the child could open the door and pay profoundly for doing so.

Clearly, it is easy to avoid situations that provoke food-related aggression, and in most circumstances, this is a far preferable choice to treating the problem. ***This aggression should only be treated if you can guarantee that you can always control the dog's access to food.*** If you cannot do this (and ***no household with children can do this***), you should not even entertain the notion of treating the aggression. Instead, it is preferable to believe that such aggression will occur when the opportunity is provided, and that it must and can be avoided.

If You Want to Treat the Food-Related Aggression and Can Do So Safely, What Do You Do?

Treatment of food-related aggression involves the same strategy outlined above for puppies (see *Feeding the Puppy in His New Home*): Gradually expose the dog to small amounts of food that is not terrifically valued, and follow this with increased amounts and quality of the food as the dog relaxes and does not respond. These are basic desensitization (DS) and counter-conditioning (CC) techniques with which a good, humane, trained/certified dog trainer can help.

You can start by hand feeding the dog small amounts of dog food. All food will come only from your hand and only when the dog is lying down, is quiet, and is calm. *If you are too fearful to do this, please do not even consider treating the aggression. Instead, please practice avoidance.* It's a better decision for you and for the dog, and the dog will trust you because of it.

If you wish to treat the dog, once the dog can accept all food from your hand without any aggression, fear, snatching or gulping, start to touch and then stroke the dog while feeding. Again, you must do this very, very gradually. With time, this should continue until you can massage the dog while providing food. The dog must be calm. Getting the dog to this stage could take months, and it may never occur in some dogs. ***For these dogs, practicing avoidance is best.*** If the dog trembles or gulps, avoiding and managing his food-related aggression may be kinder to him than treating it.

After the dog relaxes when touched and fed, you can introduce a dish as discussed above in the puppy section. At first a small amount of food should be offered. The dog should be taught "sit, wait, okay" and can only have the food when you say "okay." After the dog has finished the small amount of food, the dog should sit or lie down and wait while you reach for the dish, refill it, and replace it. ***If the dog growls or lunges***

at any point in the sequence, you need to leave the dog alone and return to try again only when the dog is calm. If you do not wish to continue to try to teach the dog that you can take his food, please consider that a good decision. Manage and avoid his aggression.

If the dog gets up, you must move the food to where the dog cannot see it and repeat the sequence of "sit, stay, wait." You may have to do this many times before the dog responds appropriately, but that is far better than allowing the dog to become aggressive. If you do not feel you have the patience to pursue such a repetitious course, please do not treat the aggression. Instead, use avoidance to control the problem. This is a responsible, humane choice.

Finally, once you can fill, offer, reach for, get, and refill the food dish, you are ready to start practicing leaving the dog and returning while the dog is eating. At first you should only move a few centimeters from the dog and then return. The dog should never react aggressively or by shaking, whining, or cringing. If the dog shows any of these behaviors, you can try to repeat the movement more slowly until the dog is calm. Alternatively, you can just decide to protect the dog and manage his reactions.

The goal is to be able to put the dish down, leave the room, return, request that the dog sit (when the dish still has food), take the dish, and have the dog relax throughout. This can take months to accomplish and may never be wholly successful. If this plan is unsuccessful, you will at least have learned the dog's limits and you should be able to calmly accept that you have to control any potential danger (i.e., **avoid the situation**).

What About Special Food Items Like Rawhides and Real Bones?

You can repeat the above for any food-related substance to which the dog reacts: dog food, rawhides, real bones, or scraps. Please note: real bones and rawhides often elicit a much more exaggerated response than does any food in a dish. If you doubt your ability or desire to work successfully with the dog, just avoid the situation. Dogs do not require rawhides to be happy.

Anyone deciding to work with a dog with food-related aggression may feel more secure doing so if the dog is fitted with a head collar. These may help you to quickly, humanely, and safely close the dog's mouth, avoiding any untoward events. If you think that a head collar might help you, please see the **Protocol for Choosing Collars, Head Collars, Harnesses, and Leads**. If you feel you *need* a head collar, please think about whether avoiding the problem is a better choice.

Final Advice

It is perfectly all right, and quite sensible, for someone to decide that they do not wish to work with a dog who has food-related aggression, and, instead, choose avoidance. No one should feel guilty for this decision, and if the dog is worried about food, it is much kinder to feed him under conditions where he need not worry. Please remember that dealing with food-related aggression is not about "not letting the dog get away with it," "controlling the dog," or "dominating the dog." In fact, it's about protecting the dog and treating the dog humanely so that he can enjoy his food and his life with you and those you love.