



FOOD AGGRESSION IN DOGS

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Does your appearance in the kitchen at mealtime elicit a growl? Does a gift of rawhide or marrow bone send your mild-mannered canine diving under the coffee table while snarling, “Grrr, mine!”? If these scenarios sound familiar to you, your dog is suffering from canine possession aggression (CPA), also known as food or object guarding.

The Trouble with Kibbles

In most cases of CPA, the dog no longer views you as the provider of good things, but rather as the scoundrel who might relieve him or her of food, treats, or toys. If you remove these items as a punishment when he growls, it will only serve to further convince your dog that his suspicions about you were right all along.

Make a Date with Your Dog—for Dinner

How often have you heard, “Leave the dog alone while he eats”? While it makes sense to keep toddlers clear at mealtime, a dog can get an inflated sense of himself if left alone while he eats. After all, in a dog or wolf pack, the alpha dog gets to eat his fill first. Instead, family members should be present while the dog eats—starting when he or she is a puppy. From time to time, it is a wise idea to approach the bowl and add a little something extra—some scrambled egg, a broken-up biscuit, a bite of turkey hotdog, or some string cheese.

Bowling Him Over

If you have an older dog who has already perfected his “Cujo Eats” imitation and it isn’t safe to approach his bowl, a different strategy is needed.

- **Step One** is to do away with his food bowl entirely for a week or two. Shep will be dining out of your hand, just a few kibbles at a time.
- **Step Two** marks the return of the food bowl, but it should remain empty until the handler passes by and drops a few kibbles in it. After those are eaten up, drop small handfuls into your dog’s bowl at intervals of one to three minutes until the whole meal has been consumed.
- By now your dog will be eager for you to approach his bowl. In **Step Three**, put a semi-filled bowl on the floor and drop in a few better-than-kibbles treats as you pass. On your next pass, add the remaining kibbles.
- **Step Four** is to put a full food bowl on the floor as your dog holds a sit and stay. Release him with a cheery “okay.” Then, once or twice a week, call your dog away from his bowl during mealtime and reward him with a tasty tidbit for coming to you. Using your sit-and-stay, wait, and take-it commands with the dog will make it absolutely clear to Shep who owns the kitchen and the tasty morsels in it.

Each of these steps should be undertaken for 10 - 14 days at each meal before going to the next step. Your dog should wear a leash as a safety measure while working on this behavior, but don’t use it to control him unless you are in jeopardy of being hurt. Since guarding behaviors can often signal other problems, a basic obedience course is highly recommended to underscore handler leadership to the dog. Finally, if you experience any backsliding, return to Step One. If you do not succeed or your dog is severely aggressive around all food products and paraphernalia, hire a certified dog trainer or applied animal behaviorist to help bring this conflict to resolution.