

Understanding and preventing food guarding.

Introduction

Dogs possess a basic inborn instinct to protect their food. It is a survival instinct. All mammals have this instinct to some degree or other.

The instinct to protect their food within the domestic environment may be latent in some dogs, but it is there. It could surface at any time, if the dog feels the need to defend its survival resource.

What happens to this food guarding instinct, whether it remains latent, or develops into full blown food guarding with growling, snapping, lunging and even biting, is usually a direct result of his learning. The learning that humans provide.

The problem for the dog is that what is a perfectly natural and healthy behaviour, often inadvertently instigated by misguided human behaviour, can ultimately end in the dog finding himself homeless, or worse, dead. Food guarding is seen as aggression, aggression is seen as unacceptable in a dog in today's modern society and it is the dog that often pays the price.

This article has been written in an effort to bring an understanding to how food guarding can be prevented or resolved.

If I were to get cross with your for stealing my chocolate, or chips or pizza, you would probably consider that understandable. I might say, "don't do that", or "Eh, they are my chips!" No one would see it as aggression, just an attempt to protect what was yours, against the threat of my stealing it.

Lets look at this from the dog's point of view.....

How food guarding can come about

Fido the puppy comes into his new home. His owners love him and all is well.

As Fido grows, he becomes more confident and outgoing and one day on the park runs off and won't return, is unusually pully on his lead and jumps up at a passing stranger

with muddy paws, making both stranger and owner cross. Fido's, owner has read some old fashioned dog training book and wonders if Fido is getting "Dominant"?

He decides to test this out by seeing if Fido will let him take his food off him. He read this in a book.

When next feeding Fido, he reaches down and takes the bowl. Fido freezes and stares indicating his discomfort. Fido is surprised, there has never been a threat to his food before. The owner misses the signal that his dog was uncomfortable with this action, it was too subtle. But the dog didn't growl, the owner is reassured. All is well.

The next Day Fido is really naughty. He jumps in a smelly pond chasing ducks and he stinks really badly. He refuses to come back when called and makes the owner late for breakfast. His owner decides that he must do something about this dog and he decides that he will implement a regular routine of removing the puppy's food to show his authority.

Fido who is very hungry after a hard morning chasing ducks, tucks in to his breakfast. As he is eating, the owner reaches down to take the food. Fido is more prepared this second time, he is now aware that his "stare" did nothing to prevent the removal of his food last time his owners hand approached his bowl. He is now ready to take more serious action. He utters a low warning growl as the hand approaches his food.

Fido's owner, though aware he was testing his dog's reaction did not actually expect this reaction, is shocked and withdraws his hand. Fido continues eating; glad his message has got across. All is well in Fido's world but not his owners.

Owner spends the day pondering Fido's behaviour. He really can not have Fido behaving this way, Dog aggression as he sees this to be, is a dangerous business, he knows that. He decides to take further action.

When feeding Fido next day the owner decides if Fido growls he is going to scruff him, as it says in the book, or smack him to punish his misdemeanour and make it clear that he, the owner, is the boss, as it says in the book. His hand approaches the bowl, Fido growls, aware that this worked last time. Owner grabs Fido by the scruff, pushes him to the floor and shouts at him.

Really angry now, the owner removes Fido's food and doesn't give it back. Fido is very frightened and hungry too! He does not understand. Eating used to be a simple, necessary pleasure. Now it seems whenever there is an owner around when he eats, there is tension.

Owner tries to steal his food, when Fido says he doesn't like it, the owner shouts and causes him pain and fear and takes his food away.

Fido decides the best thing is to keep the owner well away from the food in an effort to relieve the tension and avoid the shouting and scruffing and food removal.

The next day, owner places food on floor, both dog and owner are now tense, wondering what the outcome of today's feeding session might be. Fido immediately goes into growl mode, summoning up his courage he gives his best "I'm not happy with you being here" stare and growls and curls his lips at his owner. He hovers over his food, standing stiff, glaring menacingly. "Back off" he growls. "Chill out about this food thing" he wishes, "go sit in the living room" he says. As the owner takes a step closer, he lunges, teeth displayed and snaps at the air. The owner, now scared, retreats. Fido resumes his eating, unnerved and worried that such tension arises at feeding time, but relieved that the owner has left his food, he is hungry!

The owner is horrified at this sudden display of 'aggression', his cute puppy has turned into an ugly, vicious, dog. He is outraged and has visions of what might happen if he ever marries and has children, with this dog around. He feels compelled to fix it. Adrenalin rushing and determined to show his dominance over the dog, he roars at the dog, and reaches down, once more for the dog's scruff. The dog with reactions three times faster than that of a human, interprets the owners move and desperate to avoid more scruffing or the removal of his survival resource, bites the owner's hand before it reaches the bowl.

All is far from well now in Fido's world or his owners.

From the start of this story, Fido has been progressively put in the situation where he feels it necessary to guard his food. He needs food to live. Fido feels that he has to be on his guard whenever he is eating. He also understands that humans do not necessarily understand, lip curling, snarling, staring, stiffening or growling. The only thing that really makes them back off is biting.

Whatever happens next to Fido, he will never forget that human hands can and do sometimes take away his food when he is eating. He is aware that he must be ever vigilant to the approach of humans. He is now aware that most attempts to communicate - growling, snarling, lip curling, staring, freezing, lunging and air snapping - all normal attempts to AVOID aggression or conflict in the dog world, are not recognised and responded to by humans.

As many food guarders do, Fido ends up in a rescue home. Others find themselves immediately at the sharp end of a needle.

His owner, ashamed at having such an aggressive dog, but too embarrassed to seek help himself, tells the home that he simply doesn't have time to care for the dog anymore. Fido, an otherwise friendly, well-socialised dog, quickly finds a new home.

There are children in this one and he loves them. They play happily together all day the first day. Fido has good manners and the owners are delighted with him. He is gentle and respectful with the children even the baby. The children have read a dog training book and they give him treats in return for sits. All is well again. Fido loves his new home, his new owners love him and the children are delighted to have such a cuddly, playful new friend. Wouldn't it be great if the story ended here?

At feeding time they place the bowl on the floor and walk away, Fido is relieved and happy, no action is necessary.

All is well for several weeks. The owners, children and dog are truly delighted.

And then one day, when Fido is eating, Fido's friend, Rosie the baby, now crawling, toddles toward Fido, on her hands and knees, as she gets closer she reaches out her tiny hand...In an instant Fido remembers that staring and freezing, growling, snarling, snapping, and lunging don't always work with humans. He has only one option available to him to protect his food..... He doesn't want to bite Rosie his friend and playmate, but he needs food to live.....

Rosie is scarred by the incident, mentally and physically. Her parents are distraught and cannot understand the sudden change in Fido – he had always been so gentle with Rosie before? And Fido, having bitten a baby is destroyed.

Food guarding is usually easily prevented – follow these points for happy relaxed mealtimes. .

DO NOT FALL INTO THE TRAP FIDOS OWNER DID!

If your dog is happy for you to approach his food or bones when eating, make him even happier, by adding to that food some higher value food like liver. Do this regularly.

Don't give him things that you later want to take off him. If you do have to remove a bone and you are not confident of your dog's reaction, call him into another room away from the bone. Bones and chews above all things are more likely to bring about food guarding behaviour because they are long lasting resources.

When your dog is eating a bone, go to him and give him another bone. When your dogs is

eating, add food to their bowls.

Hand feeding your dog can help make it understand that human hands PROVIDE food, not take it away. Use your dog's daily food for training purposes. This means you may feed your dog from your hand 100 times a day (tiny portions). He'll like your hands. Have other people do the same –he'll like other people's hands.

If your dog is the sort of dog who will have a bone, chew it, then leave it, but guard it from a distance, then only feed him bones when he is hungry enough to eat them, of the type that he can actually totally consume. Or give them in another room and leave him to it.

If ever your dog growls when eating or at any other time, remember he is only saying, "please don't take my bone" or "please stop doing that". If I said to you, please don't take my chocolate would you scruff me or pin me to the floor??? If you did do that, do you think that would benefit our relationship? Do you think that it would make me respect you more???

If a dog growls and you leave him alone then he learns that growling is all he needs to do. **GROWLING, IS NOT AGGRESSION, IT IS DESIGNED TO PREVENT AGGRESSION.** It may be undesirable, but it is not aggressive in itself. If you never remove food from your dog he may learn that even growling is not necessary.

If a dog learns that you always provide food and more food or bones and more bones then he is unlikely to guard his food at all.

If you have confirmed food guarder and do not feel confident to try any of the above, then just feed your dog in another room, where he will not be disturbed. At least this way, the food guarding behaviour is not likely to deteriorate.

If your dog regularly guards things or is over protective of his food, toys or other items, and you don't feel that anything in this article can help, then GET HELP from someone and soon. Unwanted behaviours rarely just "go away" of their own accord, but they are, very often, very easy to resolve once proper understanding is brought to the situation.

This article was written by Denise McLeod of CaDeLac Dog Training.

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