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Managing food aggression or resource guarding in the older dog

Food related aggression can develop in older dogs. When a dog has food related aggression, he or she typically guards food, rawhides, treats, real bones or even favorite toys. Some dogs will become aggressive and guard any amount or type of food, and others will become aggressive when it is only a high value food. It is not unusual to have a dog become reactive or aggressive if protecting a high value treat.

Food related aggression can be related and intertwined with other types of aggressions but is a valid issue onto itself.

If your dog is only aggressive around food, but does not challenge or become aggressive to you or someone else in another context, do not assume this is not problematic. Any inappropriate aggressive reaction by a dog can result in the harm of a person or another animal. Food is everywhere and an integral part of our lives. This is especially true in the presence of children who often walk throughout the house holding food. When children are involved the stakes are exponentially increased. Your choice as the owner is either to treat or manage the food related aggression. Ignoring it is not a safe option.

For many people, especially those with small children in the house, deciding to manage the food related aggression is often a safe choice that can 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 person or animal approaching and increase their intensity as the person gets closer.
 - Some dogs will growl while shaking and gulping their food.
 - Some dogs will stare intensely at anyone who is near them while they eating and snarl
- The safest resolution for all these behaviors involves the same strategy; **If possible, feed the dog where he or she 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 safely maybe something that requires more effort than the average person may want 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:

- All people involved understand that the behavior is abnormal and dangerous
- They do not wish to change this behavior with their dog.

- They will avoid eliciting the behavior at all costs so that they are safe and so they do not help the dog reinforce this undesired behavior.

The choice to not treat, but manage the food related aggression as described is an active and conscious decision. It is not the same as ignoring the problem. This is not the same as tolerating the growling or other signs of aggression while being feed. If you tolerate the growl, you are actually passively reinforcing the behavior. Dogs, like people hone their skills every time they are allowed to exhibit a behavior, whether it is appropriate or inappropriate. If you do not wish to actively wish to teach the dog a more suitable behavior than aggression in the presence of food, or if you cannot or are afraid to do so, you must ensure that you and the dog avoid all circumstances in which the dog can become aggressive.

How can we can we avoid triggers causing food related aggression?

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

1. The dog is fed at discrete times from a dish that is kept sequestered until the dish is placed on the floor at which point the dog is given access to the food and humans and other dogs (pets) leave, or the dog is asked to sit and stay until the dish is put down. The dog is not permitted to approach until instructed to do so. Once the dog has finished their meal they are free to leave the feeding area and the bowl is collected and hidden away until the next feeding. Leaving the bowl out afford the pet the opportunity to become protective and aggressive about their food bowl Some dogs react to other pets in the environment while eating, they too need to be removed from the situation.
2. The dog is **never** feed from the table or table scraps when food is being prepared.
3. Never attempt to take the food or bowl away from your dog while they are eating. This will make the problem worse.
4. The dog is **always** behind a locked barrier (gate, door, crate) when people are eating or prepping food. Yes this does mean the dog is banished from the family during dinner parties and barbecues, however this is safer than permitting the dog to be present.
5. Any treats must be placed in the dog's bowl, in a room where the dog is undisturbed and must be the type of treat the dog can finish in one session. Do not give rawhide or chew bones where it will take several sittings to consume said item.
6. Some dogs only react aggressively to high value treats, such as bones, rawhides, pig ears etc. The simplest solution to this is to remove these treats from your pet's repertoire forever. This is not harsh or cruel it is common sense and a matter of safety.

Clearly outlining specific triggers, and then avoiding these situations is challenging but it is manageable, and is often preferred to actually "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 entertain the idea of treating the food aggression, rather managing its triggers.

If you want to treat food related aggression and can do it safely, what do you do?

Treatment of food related aggression involves basic desensitization and counterconditioning techniques, which is best done under the direct supervision of a Veterinary Behaviorist or qualified dog trainer. This involves gradually exposing your dog to small amounts of low value food and follow this with increased amounts of food both in quantity and value. This can be a dangerous situation and is only recommended to be done under the direct supervision of a behaviorist.

Final thoughts

It is perfectly all right and sensible for someone to decide that they do not want to work with a dog who has food related aggression, and instead chose management and avoiding triggers. No one should ever feel guilty for this decision, and if the dog is worried about food it is kinder to put them in an environment where they can eat without fear. Please remember that dealing with food aggression is not about “controlling your dog” or “dominating your dog. In fact it is about protecting your dog and treating the dog humanly so they can enjoy food and his or her life.