

## FOOD/RESOURCE GUARDING

The methods I use and recommend are safe to use, they do not put owners or dogs at risk, nor do they set up situations that may have destructive “fallout” on the owner/dog relationship, as so many methods that recommend punishment tend to do. There is no way to “correct” a dog into liking you and respecting you – FEARM you, yes, -- but healthy respect and trust, no way. The bulk of the “correction/ dominance/ ‘show him who’s boss’” type methods encourage you to be in competition with your dog. I rehabilitate and “retrain” hundreds of dogs every semester who’ve been similarly confused and conditioned and who are sometimes becoming dangerous because of it. (Please see Jean Donaldson’s [Culture Clash](#) for more explanation about how and why this is common in our society.)

There are as many methods and techniques as there are trainers and owners so be aware that these offered here are what I do and what I teach others and my students to do and my own happy, friendly, safe, gentle dogs are my proof.

First, food (resource) guarding is a normal canine behavior. They are not humans; they don’t understand that you don’t want their food (stuff). Competition over resources is natural for them; it is up to us to show them that we are not the enemy but that we are the PROVIDERS. I like to say I’m the “benign despot” doling out good things by my grace -- not an all-powerful tyrant constantly trying to prove I’m in charge of stuff.

I have rarely had a Swissy puppy (or any other large breed) who didn’t grrrrrr once or twice, even while very young, over their food or a bone or whatever. Either they grrrrr when another dog comes around or possibly even if a human gets too close. They are issuing a WARNING by growling. The goal is NOT to stop them from growling; the goal is to stop them from feeling the NEED to warn. Stopping the warning, without stopping the reason for it, is only hiding the aggression, not eliminating it. That said, it must be understood that getting rid of the warning alone is the most dangerous thing you can do. The warning keeps people safe from the possibility of a surprise bite. If you teach him to “not growl” and he just stiffens and slows down in his chewing that is a sign that you are about to turn him into a dangerous dog. A dog with no “warning” is a bad bite waiting to happen. Even a two year old child can figure out that a growling dog should be avoided (and/or it will at least bring an adult running if they hear the sound), but if you manage to silence his warning using corrections (fear) you will have a dog who when faced with someone he doesn’t fully fear he may well chomp first and ask questions later (more on this in the next post for older dogs)

In addition, you don’t want to accidentally reward the growling either, instead, you want to show the dog that it is unnecessary and useless to growl and that the proximity of people to the food is absolutely necessary and to be enjoyed, not just tolerated.

So the dog has his dish and you walk past him to get to the sink and he says grrrrr, what do you do? With a little guy (under 4-5 months) the best thing to do is to ignore it. That’s right, NOTHING -- don’t give him the satisfaction. Remember, behavior that is reinforced will be repeated and behavior that is not reinforced will be extinguished. Like I’ve already stated it is a rare dog who never growls or postures (stiffens) over food or a toy or bone when very little, but I’ve rarely had one that did it more than once, because the first time didn’t work (i.e. was ignored and no positive or negative feedback given to the dog), they don’t try it again because it was useless. I view the first growls as a mini-tantrum. Anyone who has had kids knows that if you let them get over it without giving them all kinds of attention for being brats they don’t offer many more of those, right? So, i.e., you don’t do ANYTHING other than what you were doing.

You can’t back away in horror; you can’t try to soothe the dog; you absolutely can’t slap him around or snatch the food away. Think about it, if you snatch his food up then he was RIGHT!!! YOU DID WANT TO STEAL IT!!! You just have to essentially laugh to yourself and continue doing whatever you were doing realizing that he is a baby and just trying out his voice. But for the next several meals you will be a very active, demonstrative, benign despot, giving him what he needs by your grace and generosity. You have to make it OBVIOUS to the dog that you (humans) GIVE food, you don’t take it away.

Start here:

First, don’t make dogs wait and wait for a release to eat. It is a gift to the dog and a quick sit and wait before you put the bowl down is fine (and good manners) but 5 minutes (even 1 minute) of waiting (“staaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyy”) is teasing. Second, if you want to have him LIKE you near his bowl and food, you must be PLEASANT and NORMAL near his bowl and food and not “messing” with him while he’s eating. Dogs don’t understand verbal language but they do understand body language and if you are hovering over them,

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sticking your hands in and out of his bowl for no good reason other than to prove that you can, you are messing with him even if you think you are being chipper and friendly about it.

For example, if I came over to your house and sat down to eat with you and all the time you were eating I tapped you on your arm and said "Hi" repeatedly and for no good reason you'd finally quit eating and throw me out of your house as a nut. So too, petting him repeatedly or stroking him while eating just to see what he does, is likely to CAUSE food aggression rather than prevent it.

With a young dog you can usually avoid this problem by not dwelling on mealtimes, ignore any uneasiness around the bowl and don't do anything to cause him to become more uneasy. Some dogs need a more proactive approach and you can do it easily by hand-feeding once in a while, i.e. fill the bowl normally but then feed one handful at a time until it's gone or put the entire meal in your pockets and then feed it walking around the house just having the dog follow you and look at you and enjoy otherwise happy normal interaction. Not every meal, just once in a while.

Other times bring goodies to his dish while he's eating. Bring him a treat while he's eating, give it to him and go away. You have to give it to him whether he's growling or not, whether he even looks up or not, just put the piece of chicken or hotdog into the bowl with the other food and leave him alone. Slowly he will realize that when you approach him while he's eating it is to deliver something good not to take anything or to bother him. (see next post for more explicit instruction on how to defuse a situation that has already escalated to more than warning aggression). Remember that little puppies growling over their food are NOT challenging you, they are not being "dominant" they are screaming out to you that they are scared you will take the food, he's telling you as clearly as he knows that you are freaking him out over the mealtime.

Dr. Ian Dunbar describes the "dumb waiter/delinquent waiter" routine as the best way to raise a dog to like, in fact NEED, you near their food. He describes it best this way. You are at a nice restaurant and you are eating and everything is great but you have a waiter who keeps "pestering" you, "need anything else here?" "Are you ready for dessert, sir?" - when you still have your salad. A "too attentive", meddling waiter is a pain in the butt and you don't want him to keep coming around unless you need something and if all your food is there and you don't need another cocktail he should step out and leave you alone to eat. HOWEVER, if you need another drink or if you'd like some more dressing or if you'd like some more rolls or coffee or whatever, then you are desperate for your "dumb waiter" to be hovering nearby. That's what I want the dog to be.....desperate for my dinner company!

The way to make the dog WANT us near, and LIKE us near, and NEED us near, and at the very least TOLERATE us near while eating is to reinforce in his brain that the food is yours and that you give it gladly and generously to him because you are the QUEEN and KING OF ALL KIBBLE. It is better to be a benign despot than a meddling tyrant. If you withhold food, or pull him away from it or otherwise reprimand him, you are only teaching him that you ARE trying to take his food and that you ARE threatening him and therefore he feels the need to respond in that manner (growling/threatening/fear) so you MUST do the opposite.

The way Dr. Dunbar recommends is that you make the big production out of preparing the dish as you always do and instead of the full meal you put about 10 kibbles only in the dish and set it down, say "ok" and walk away. Stand about 10 feet away near the kitchen counter where the rest of the food is so you can get it. The dog will gobble those ten pieces and then will look at you like you are nuts! At which point he sort of really would like you to come over to help him as somehow most of his dinner has mysteriously vanished. When he looks up at you, take a 1/4 cup more of his ration and take it to the dish, pour it in and let him eat it. Do this very "matter of fact", no emotions, no staring, NO STAY, NO PETTING, NOTHING other than just this "gift" of more food, and repeat as he eats each small serving (you see he "needs" his "waiter" to replenish his portions). Soon he will start to thrive on you being close by, he'll want you RIGHT THERE to help him keep the kibble coming.

This will also help slow him down while eating (another common Swissy problem) since he will not have so much to gobble at once and because he will quickly start to relax as he isn't "competing" for the food with you anymore, he's accepting your gracious gift. He'll be wondering how he ever thought you wanted to steal the food before, it will be a whole new feeling for him to eat in peace and with support and assistance, rather than fear and competition. Be careful that you don't start making him nervous about eating by hovering near his dish except when he needs you to be there with more food to add. Let him look up to you to bring more, don't be that pestering annoying waiter, but rather be the generous waiter nearby and ready, but unobtrusive. Obviously,

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each meal served by the “waiter” will take a few more minutes than just setting the bowl down, so when you can’t do it (in a hurry, going to work, whatever), feed him in his crate IN PEACE and leave him alone.

Hope this first installment helps get your little guys off on the right paw. The basis of my philosophy about training is that, frankly, I don’t want a 120lb “opponent” living in my home, under my roof. Instead, I have dogs that are my friends and partners. I treat them with respect and they in turn respect me and usually respect each other! Make no mistake, the food is mine and they know they need me to get it as they need me to get anything else that they enjoy, up to and including oxygen, and fun and play and everything. But they’ve learned that all the good things come FROM me by me GIVING it to them, NOT by me withholding these items and lording it over them, or by me controlling them through intimidation or heavy commands/reprimands. That would only teach them that I’m dangerous and unpredictable, not what I want them to think!!

Instead, and because they don’t fear me, they offer many behaviors all the time, especially when they are young, and they learn then that I’m much more likely to come through with some of the “property”/resources that I share with them if they offer nice behaviors, calm, happy, friendly, silly good dog behaviors---- those are constantly reinforced. Anything else is either prevented or more likely ignored the first time and it therefore quickly dissipates.

While it is very important to prevent the escalation of resource guarding from puppy-hood what do you do now if you already have a problem? What do you do now if you have an older puppy, adult dog or rescue dog coming into your home that is already funny about his bowl, food, toys, bones? First you need to manage this dog carefully to make sure that he doesn’t have opportunity to bite (i.e. supervise ALL children carefully) and heed any warning signs from the dog. Second, stop trying to suppress warning signs, stop all corrections (physical and verbal) near or over food and seek one-on-one help from a competent trainer/behavior consultant who can come to your home to evaluate in person. Be aware that not all “trainers” are competent and if one suggests that you do something that seems like it might be abusive or likely to escalate the aggression or put you in danger or hurt the dog (mentally or physically), DON’T do it, find another trainer. Get references and see the trainer’s dogs if possible. If your trainer’s own dog must be locked away from the world when food is around or is otherwise “iffy” about possessions, you might want to look further for a trainer with some successful pets/students. Be somewhat understanding if your trainer has a rescue dog that is being rehabbed, but if they’ve raised a dog from puppy-hood who is not stable, have some sense and move on.

If, as you read the first installment, you’ve noticed some of the signs that you might be causing the aggression, i.e. you’ve been accidentally tormenting him while he’s eating (handling food/bowl, handling the dog/petting face, ears, back, tail, everything) or teasing beforehand (long stays and/ or staring in his face before released to eat) constantly or even intermittently for weeks or months then don’t despair, most cases are treatable, but do realize that it will take him quite some time to learn to relax with you near his bowl.

If you just took in an older dog with some “baggage” tread lightly, you don’t know what the previous owners were trying or how they went about it. The first thing I would do to break the cycle is to feed and dog who is already getting aggressive over food in his crate? Let him eat in peace and don’t push it at first, give both of you a break from each other and start fresh after a few weeks (this is what I do with Rescues that have just arrived). I do use treats for training/socializing and rarely do even highly aggressive resource guarding dogs react adversely to treats-in-hand, but be aware that it can happen and you may need to build up trust in other ways (slower) with toys and other low level items or just with play/praise (slow but possible). I suggest again that if you take in an older dog with a high level of aggression over food or anything else that you seek help from a competent trainer/consultant/ experienced rehabber.

After a couple of months of eating to eat, not as part of an “event”, if he lets you hand feed him, do it, but you cannot mess with him and withhold the food even if he growls, etc. Dogs don’t think in the same way as humans. He’s thinking he growls and you get more “pushy” so he growls some more and you get more angry or assertive and you leave him no where else but UP and it eventually escalates to full blown aggression much more likely than stopping the problem. Dogs may not escalate it right away into biting, they may offer other signs that they are disturbed and tortured by your pushing them. I.e. they may eat very, very fast, almost choking over the food to get rid of it before you start messing with them. They may yawn or raise their hackles (hair on the back), they may eat very slowly and/or stiffen or look away, if you come near or touch them. These are signs they are uncomfortable but in a state of indecision, they can’t decide whether to fight you or flee from you. They are still giving you warnings even if you’ve sadly managed to stop them from growling! They are one



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dogs who would bite in an instant if they thought someone was creeping on their food. At my house they don't own food (or anything else) and haven't thought about guarding anything in years. They are normal, safe dogs in my adult home, when I have them at Swissy parties with children and adults running around with food they are supervised. These are dogs many of you have seen time and time again and you'd never know that I was once hand feeding them and praying that I could keep all my fingers. I'd be happy to help anyone who has a specific question, either publicly or privately. I cannot offer more than general safe advice such as these two posts without seeing the dog in person (I don't believe any trainer can do much long-distance), beware of methods that seem to put you in harm's way.

Don't try anything physical with a dog on the advice of a trainer who can't SHOW you in person how and furthermore, I don't recommend much that's physical at all (especially with these large dogs), I find a lot of other options to be more effective and much safer overall.

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