

B-24 PROTOCOL FOR DOGS AND INTERACTIONS WITH FOOD, RAWHIDE, BISCUITS, AND BONES

Myths about feeding dogs are almost as numerous as myths about dog behavior. Dogs are omnivorous but have strong carnivorous tendencies. This means that they may prefer meat, given a choice, but will also opportunistically supplement their diet with fruits, berries, and herbs. Dogs will scavenge if given the chance. Although this tendency is a serious public health problem in cities, it is interesting to note that scavenging garbage is a major mode of support for wolves in some areas of Italy. 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, and so on. It is not necessary for dogs to have any of these for good nourishment, but most dogs value these treats. The problem arises when dogs protect these items and become aggressive around them. This protocol is designed to help you understand how some of these problems develop and how to avoid incidents of aggression.

New Puppies

Puppies should learn early in life that they do not have to compete for food. This means that when the pups first experience semisolid food they should be fed from multiple dishes, or ones with central wells that disperse the pups. Frequent feedings are best because puppies learn that there will be enough food when they are hungry. If puppies are given treats or bones, *all* puppies must be included; they may need to be separated so that they do not fight. No one puppy should be permitted to control access to all the treats or all food or to threaten its littermates' access to those. Experimental work has shown that if puppies are given a bone, they will structure a hierarchy around that bone. The hierarchy can change, but both its maintenance and its shifts are affected by threats and challenges. This is exactly what we do not want to encourage with our pets.

No puppy that is old enough to be adopted is too young to learn to sit (See "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program"). For reasons involving social stability, ease of housebreaking, immunological health, and the pup's ability to handle social change, the earliest a puppy should be adopted into a new home is between 7½ and 8½ weeks of age. However, puppies as young as 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. Doing so will accomplish several goals: (1) the dogs will start to learn to be calm before eating and when they want anything: the food dish will not be placed on the floor until the dog is quiet and sitting; (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; and (3) clients will be able to shift hierarchies 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, the latter is preferable because, to some extent, it removes the client's influence over food from the social system. If this pattern of activity is enforced by the breeder, the clients' task will be easier when they encourage their dogs to sit and wait when they are ready to put the food dish on the floor.

Once it is in its new home, the puppy should be taught to sit for *all* food treats (rewards for behavioral protocols, biscuits, and bones). The puppy should also be taught "wait" if

the food is in a dish. Puppies have short attention spans and should not be forced to sit or wait long. As they mature, they can be asked to wait for increasingly longer periods, but starting with a few seconds is reasonable. The easiest way to accomplish this is as follows.

The dog should be asked to sit. As the dish is picked up (and it is best to do this so that the area where the dish is placed is right next to where the dog will sit, which prevents the client from inadvertently encouraging the puppy to get up and make a mistake), the client should say "sit" and gently place a hand in front of the dog's chest, under the chin and say "wait." The pup only has to wait a few seconds. The client can then say "okay" and either put the dish down and allow the dog to eat or hold the dish while the dog eats. The latter is easier if the dog either growls at any movement once the dish is down or if the dog wolfs down its food once the dish is down. Holding the dish allows the client to feed the dog small amounts at first and then add food gradually so that the dog is helped to eat more slowly. If the puppy becomes excited every time the dish is slightly withdrawn, only small amounts of food should be placed in the dish at any one time. Refilling the dish will give the client the opportunity to repeat the "sit, wait, okay" sequence frequently and will help the puppy reinforce its own appropriate behavior to these commands. Such repetition is tedious for the client but invaluable for the pup.

After the dog learns "wait," the client should start teaching the dog to sit while the client is permitted to take the dish, regardless of whether the dog has finished eating. This is important because at some point the client may need to retrieve the dog's dish back with food still in it. The easiest way is to hand-feed the dog the small amounts discussed previously and say "wait" with a slightly restraining hand placed 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" or "good boy" *and reward the dog with the food*. If the dog has problems with this sequence, (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 away and giving it back frequently with times that vary from a few seconds to 30 seconds. Once the dog's behavior is perfect, start to add food to the dish. At first let the dog lick a small amount of food 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 reaching the point where you can take the dish from the dog using the commands "sit" and "wait" when the dish contains food and is on the ground or floor. Remember, new food items are naturally desirable, and a puppy that 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 previously.

Older Dogs

Food-related aggression is a problem with some dogs. When a dog has food-related aggression, it will guard its food, treats, rawhides, or real bones from other dogs or from people. This type of 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 you in other contexts, do not assume that you do not have a serious problem. 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 small children who either carry food with them or who constantly smell like food. Even if you decide not to actively treat any food-related aggression in your dog, understanding it can help you avoid it and can render your pet safe and loving.

Food-related aggression can be quite variable. Some dogs begin to growl softly from a great distance and increase the intensity of their growling as people approach. Some dogs growl while shaking and gulping their food, and some dogs stare at anyone within their view while they are eating and snarling. The logic supporting the safe resolution of all of these behaviors is similar—if possible, feed the animal where it is 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 require more effort than the average person is willing to expend. Not treating the aggression is not the same as ignoring it—a conscious decision to not treat food-related aggression means (1) that the people involved understand that the behavior is abnormal, undesirable, and dangerous, (2) that they do not wish to work with the dog to change the behavior, and (3) that they will avoid eliciting the behavior at all costs so that they are safe and so that they do not help the dog reinforce the undesirable response. These are active, conscious choices. They are not the same as living with a dog that growls when it is fed and tolerating that behavior. In the latter situation the client is 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. Clients who do not wish to actively teach the dog a more suitable behavior than aggression in the presence of food or those who cannot or are too afraid to work with the animal *must avoid all circumstances* in which the aggression will be apparent.

Avoidance 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 people leave the area, 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 food scraps when food is being prepared.
3. The dog is always behind a barrier (a gate, a door, or in a crate) when people are eating or preparing food (or when other dogs are eating, if the problem is aggression toward other dogs in the presence of food). This means that the dog is banished from family barbecues; however, this is safer than permitting the dog to be present. Also, the anxiety level of the people decreases dramatically if they are not worried that there might be a dog bite. If people are stressed or distressed because of concern about the potential for a dangerous event, they will have little patience for the pet and will be less understanding of the pet's special needs, which can be modified with work. Put the dog in another space and do not feel guilty.
4. Any treats (dog biscuits or table scraps) must be placed in the dog's bowl in a room where the dog is undisturbed and must be of a nature that the dog can finish them in

one session. The latter requirement is particularly important for dogs that guard food. If the client knows that the dog hoards and protects biscuits, even biscuits may need to be deleted from the dog's diet unless they are sufficiently small to be finished within minutes of presentation. This is particularly important advice in the case of dogs that hide their biscuits in sofas or other places because the client will not know where the dog has stashed its treats and could then inadvertently be victimized by the dog when they approach the cached biscuit.

5. Some dogs respond inappropriately only to very high-quality treats such as bones, rawhides, pig ears, pizzle sticks, cow hooves, or chew sticks. If these treats cannot be finished in one setting (and most cannot), the most simple, easiest solution is to remove them from the dog's diet forever. This is not cruel, injurious, or deprivational for the dog—it is good common sense. The dog is forbidden to experience something that other dogs have and would find enjoyable; however, this cost is small compared with the guilt any client 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 ensuring that they do not help the dog orchestrate a disaster by setting them 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 treat, the child could open the door and pay profoundly for that innocent gesture.

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 the clients can guarantee that they can always control the dog's access to food. If they cannot do this (and *no* household with children can do this), they should not even entertain the notion of treating the aggression. Instead, it is preferable to believe that the aggression will occur when the opportunity is provided and that all provocation opportunities must be avoided.

Treatment involves the same approaches as mentioned previously: gradual exposure to small amounts of a food that is not highly valued. The amounts and quality of the food are increased only if the dog relaxes and does not respond. The client can start by hand-feeding the dog small amounts of dog food. All food will come only from the client's hand and will be relinquished only when the dog is lying down, is quiet, and is calm. If the client is too fearful to do this, the aggression should not be treated, and instead the client should practice avoidance.

When the dog can accept all food from the client's hand without reacting adversely, the client should start stroking the dog during feeding. This should continue until the client can massage the dog while providing food, and the dog's response is calm and friendly. This process could require several months.

After the dog relaxes to the touch when fed, the client should introduce a dish in the manner recommended previously. After giving the dog ever-increasing amounts of massage while holding the dish *and* having the dog respond favorably, the client is ready to start introducing food in a dish.

At first a small amount of food should be offered. The dog should be taught "sit," "wait," and "okay" and can only get the food when the client says "okay." After the dog has finished the small amount of food, the dog must be taught to sit and stay (or lie down and stay) while the client reaches for the dish, refills it, and replaces it. If the dog growls or

lunges at any point in the sequence, the client should abandon the dog and return to try again when the dog is calm. If the dog gets up, the client must move the food to where the dog cannot see it and repeat the sequence of sit, stay, and wait. The client may have to do this many times before the dog responds appropriately, but repetition is far better than allowing the dog to become aggressive and control the situation. If the client does not have the patience to pursue such a repetitious course, it is better to not treat the aggression and use avoidance to control the problem.

Finally, once the client can fill and offer, reach for, get, and refill the food dish, the client can start practicing leaving the dog and returning while the dog is eating. At first the client should only move a few centimeters from the dog and then return. The dog should never react inappropriately. If the dog does react, the client must repeat that sequence until the dog is calm. Ultimately the client should be able to put the dish down, leave the room, return, request that the dog sit (with food still in the dish), take the dish, and have the dog relax throughout. This can take months to accomplish and may never be wholly successful. If not wholly successful, the client will have at least learned the dog's limits

and then must take great pains to control any potential danger attendant with that limit (i.e., avoid the situation).

The client can repeat the previously listed steps for any food-related substance to which the dog reacts: dog food, rawhides, real bones, or scraps. Clients should note that real bones and rawhides often elicit a much more exaggerated response than any food in a dish. If there is any doubt about the client's ability or desire to work successfully with the dog, the client should avoid all potentially provocative situations, even if this means that the dog is forever deprived of rawhide. The dog will not suffer from the absence of rawhide.

Anyone who works with a dog with food-related aggression may feel more secure if the dog is fitted with a head collar. The Gentle Leader collar is the ideal choice in this situation because the client can quickly, humanely, and safely close the dog's mouth, thus avoiding any untoward events.

It is perfectly all right and sensible for anyone to decide to not work with a dog with food-related aggression, instead choosing avoidance. No one should feel guilty for this decision.