

# FOOD GUARDING – IT’S NOT A GAME!

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## **What is food guarding?**

Food guarding is a natural survival instinct in dogs. In the wild, a dog might spend several hours scavenging for a few measly scraps of food. If he were then to passively watch another dog pick it up and run off with it, he would starve in no time. We have all heard about abandoned dogs rescued from the street that have had to scrounge for and defend their food while on their own. Once in the safety of your home, your rescued dog will simply relax, right? Wrong! Sometimes this survival behavior is so ingrained that even in your home, a dog will **fight** to keep you away from his food bowl. Tell your loved ones that this is an extremely dangerous situation for everyone in the household!

## **How do I recognize when my dog is guarding his food?**

There are concrete warning signs that your dog might give you to let you know that he is uncomfortable when you get too close to his food. These signs range from the subtle to the obvious. If the subtle signs have worked in the past, the dog is likely to continue to use them. If they haven't worked, then he might go straight for what does work – lunging at, or even biting, the intruder. Some signs to watch for are:

- As you approach your dog at his bowl, he wags his tail and may or may not stop eating.
- Dog wags tail harder, but doesn't stop eating.
- Dog eats faster, and may or may not wag tail.
- Dog eats faster, tenses body.
- Dog eats faster, tenses, "freezes" and/or looks at you from the top of the eyes so you can see the whites around the edges.
- Dog eats faster, tenses, "freezes", gives a hard stare and growls.
- Dog growls, then snaps jaws, without making contact with you.
- Dog bites.
- Dog guards not only the bowl but the area around the bowl as well.
- Dog attacks.

Before you see these escalate, contact The Well-Heeled Dog to help you with techniques designed to teach the dog to relax and trust you gradually. We will tell you honestly: If there are small children in the household, you might want to think seriously about re-homing the dog. NEVER punish the dog for food guarding. He is already in a defensive state; punishing him will only make him more fearful, more defensive and more aggressive.

Any resource that your dog sees as valuable and is fearful of losing could be one that he guards. It could be a toy, a rawhide chew or any other object. Be mindful of this as you observe him with objects. If you see any of the signs noted above, get professional help.

## **How to prevent food guarding.**

As soon as you acquire a new dog or puppy (the younger the better) that is **not** defensive around his bowl, start right away to make him comfortable with you around while he eats. Don't just fill the bowl and leave. Sit beside your dog, pet him, put your hands in the bowl. Occasionally, drop really yummy treats into the bowl. You're teaching your dog that you aren't interested in taking his food away; on the contrary, when you're around, great stuff shows up in his bowl! Next, practice taking the bowl away, adding something yummy to it and returning it to him. Walk up to the bowl as he's eating and drop in a scrumptious tidbit. Have everyone in the family, except for very young children, do this exercise. Always closely supervise children around your dog! Then have visiting friends do the exercise, also under your supervision. You will be teaching your pet that humans and food bowls close together means Great Stuff Happens!

