



Defusing Possessive Aggression

Possessive aggression (object/food bowl guarding) can be one of the more treatable forms of aggression in dogs **if it is caught early**. If you know what to look for, it is easy to identify the symptoms and a desensitization program, started early, is relatively simple to maintain since the owner can closely control the environment.

Identify the Symptoms

The key to successfully dealing with possessive aggression is an **early** diagnosis. If you notice your dog exhibiting any of the behaviors listed below, contact a qualified Behavior Consultant to help you get on track with a behavior modification program:

- Does your dog begin to quickly gulp down food (or a rawhide) when you get too close?
- Does your dog "freeze" (hold his head perfectly still) over his food bowl or a toy when you approach?
- Does your dog take stolen objects or toys and "entrench" himself under a table or bed to prevent you from taking the object away?

Remember, the earlier the problem is diagnosed, the better the prognosis for defusing the behavior. Dogs who have already growled, snapped or bitten to protect their possessions require a more in-depth modification program. Do not attempt to handle such behavior on your own! Possessive/aggressive dogs can be dangerous, especially to children. Contact a qualified Behavior Consultant for a diagnosis and a specific behavior modification or management program.

Prevention: For a new puppy or adult dog who doesn't guard things – start these as soon as you bring your new dog home:

Of course, not all dogs have issues with their possessions and/or their food bowl. To be sure your dog enjoys having people around when he eats or has a rawhide, practice the following exercises. Proceed only if the dog is relaxed. If he is stressed, refuses to eat or you think the dog will bite you, stop the exercises and seek help from a qualified trainer.

1. Hand feed several meals.
 - a. Sit with your dog and give him his kibble one bite at a time.
 - b. Speak pleasantly and stroke him while you offer him food with your other hand
2. Hold his bowl in your lap and allow your dog to eat from the bowl.
 - a. Speak to him and stroke his head and body while he eats
3. Place your dog's bowl on the floor and as he eats, periodically reach down to drop in a piece of something tasty (like a bite of cheese, chicken or beef).

Exercises for Dogs exhibiting symptoms of resource guarding:

1. Stand a few feet away from your dog while he eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor.
 - a. Do not move toward your dog.
 - b. Say something like, 'What have you got there?' In a conversational tone and at the same time, toss a special treat (i.e. small bites of cheese, chicken or beef) toward the bowl. Continue every few seconds until your dog finishes eating his kibble.
 - c. Repeat this exercise each time you feed your dog until he eats in a relaxed way for 10 meals in a row. Then move to step 2.

2. While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, say ‘What have you got there?’ in a conversational tone. At the same time, take one step toward him and toss a special treat toward the bowl. Then immediately step back. Repeat this sequence every few seconds until your dog has finished eating.
3. While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying ‘What have you got there?’ in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog’s bowl and drop a special treat into it. Then immediately turn around and walk away. Repeat this sequence every few seconds until your dog has finished eating. When he eats in a relaxed way for 10 meals in a row, you’re ready for the next stage.
4. While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying ‘What have you got there?’ in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog, holding a special treat in your hand. Bend down slightly, holding the treat out just an inch or two in your dog’s direction. Encourage him to stop eating the food in the bowl to take the treat. After he eats the treat from your hand, immediately turn around and walk away. Repeat this sequence every few seconds until your dog has finished eating.
 - a. Each day, bend down a little more when you offer your dog the special treat so that your hand moves an inch or two close to his bowl. Stay at this stage until you can bend down and hold your hand with the treat right next to your dog’s bowl. When your dog eats relaxed for 10 meals in a row as you repeatedly approach to bend down and offer him a treat next to his bowl, you’re ready for the next stage.
5. While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying ‘What have you got there?’ in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog, bend down and touch his bowl with one hand while offering him a special treat with your other hand. Continue to do this every few seconds until your dog has finished the food in his bowl. When your dog eats relaxed for 10 meals in a row as you repeatedly approach to bend down and offer him a treat next to his bowl, you’re ready for the next stage.
6. While your dog eats dry kibble from a bowl on the floor, approach him saying ‘What have you got there?’ in a conversational tone. Stand next to your dog, bend down and pick up his bowl with one hand. Raise it only six inches off the floor and drop a special treat in the bowl. Then immediately return the bowl to the floor so that your dog can eat from it. Continue to do this every few seconds until your dog has finished all the food in his bowl. As you repeat the sequence, raise the bowl slightly higher off the floor each time until you can lift it all the way up to your waist and stand upright. Repeat the sequence, but when you pick up your dog’s bowl, walk over to a table or counter with it. Then put a special treat into the bowl, walk back to your dog and return the bowl to the same place on the floor.
7. LAST STAGE! Have all family members go through stages one through six (always have adult supervision for children and no one under 8 years of age should participate). Each person needs to start at the beginning and progress through the steps the same way, always making sure that your dog continues to look relaxed and comfortable during exercises. Don’t assume that because your dog is okay with one person approaching his bowl, he’ll automatically be comfortable with another person doing the same thing. He must learn that the rules work the same way with everyone.

Last but not least, practice obedience through positive reinforcement. Besides having a well-behaved dog, obedience improves your relationship with your dog, which is a benefit to you both. Do not punish or intimidate your dog when he guards food. Remember that when a person approaches a food-guarding dog, the dog will react as though the person intends to take the food away.

It is important to note that possessive aggression, no matter how mild, is still aggression. Don't try any of the exercises listed under "Prevention" if you have ever noticed your dog displaying any of the symptoms as outlined in this informational handout. Instead, seek help from a qualified Behavior Consultant. Remember, possessive aggression, caught early, can, in many instances, be successfully overcome.

For more information about pet behavior and training, please **visit our website at michiganhumane.org**.