

My Jack Russell terrier is very good with people except when it comes to food. If someone goes near him when he is eating, he growls and looks like he would bite. Is there anything we can do besides staying away from him when he is eating?

Food aggression or food bowl guarding are fairly common behavior issues in dogs, especially in dogs who come from a shelter situation. It is a normal survival mechanism for dogs living in a pack to guard their food and threaten another dog who approaches while they are eating. In our households, we may need to teach a dog not to feel afraid his food will be stolen by a family member. It is much easier to prevent this type of behavior with exercises and specific feeding instructions than try to correct once it becomes apparent, but I'll suggest one technique that should help.

For your dog who is already threatening to bite, begin slowly. You may need the help of a veterinary behaviorist or professional trainer to ensure you don't get bitten. Begin by taking up the food dish between meals. When it is time to feed again, place an empty bowl on the floor. Walk away from the dish with his food in your hands. When he sees that you put down an empty bowl, he'll look at you wondering where the food is. At that point, walk slowly toward the empty bowl and in a safe way, drop some food into the bowl and walk away again. Once he eats that, he'll look at you again and at that point walk back and place some more food in the bowl. Repeating this pattern will allow your dog to associate a person approaching his bowl as a good thing (more food on its way), rather than a threat that his food will be taken away.

At the end of the meal, pick up the bowl and give him a super special treat. That will help him associate having his bowl removed with good things, not something to become aggressive about. After a period of time, and a lot of patience and effort on your part, he should become more at ease when handles his bowl or comes near him while eating. However, to be safe, if you have children in the house, they should be taught not to approach him while eating even if you feel comfortable being near him. And don't forget to teach him good manners by always have him sit and wait politely while you set down his food bowl.

- Francine Rattner, VMD