

Behavior Tips: *My dog growls if he has a real bone. Is he a risk to me or the kids?*

If your dog displays aggressive behaviour towards bones, treats or any toy, immediate intervention is required. This behaviour may pose a risk to people and pets since dogs can hide bones/treats and bite those who do not know they are there. You should always first speak to your veterinarian regarding any behaviour concerns you may have since they will know how to avoid or modify such behaviours and if you need specialist help.



Dog with food-related aggression appears calm and relaxed with rawhide bone when given space and not approached



Same dog, showing signs of aggression when approached. Ears are back, snarling, baring teeth and growling.

Behaviour problems involving food-related and possessive aggression

Canine possessive-aggression refers to aggression displayed by a dog when other members of the household (dog, cat or human) approach high-value, non-food items. These items may include beds, blankets or a favourite toy. When the aggression involves food - a real bone, a biscuit, a food toy (stuffed Kong, antlers, starch pressed “bones”) – the concern is food-related aggression. From the dog’s perspective we must understand that food toys are “food”.

These behaviours may pose serious risks to your family if left untreated. The aggressive behaviour may be displayed as your dog growling, snapping, and/or biting to protect their highly valued object. This aggressive behaviour may be directed either to a specific item or to all toys and foods/food treats in general. The aggression may initially begin as a growl or lip curl, but if ignored, it can progress to biting.

At some level this behaviour may be an ancestral behaviour that evolved as a method to protect limited resources in the wild. There are many potential sources for this behaviour. Dogs may acquire this behaviour as a puppy, learning from their mother or littermates to protect food – especially if there was never enough food. Dogs can develop aggressive behaviour in response to a new dog, cat or child in the household if they think they have to compete for food or toys.

When they are showing possessive tendencies, it is best not to fight or struggle with dogs. Doing so will only reinforce your dog’s anxiety over the limited resource. Instead of trying to remove the item, try trading for a better reward – a piece of chicken or steak. If the dog will not drop what they have and take the reward – stop. Try to distract them by offering a walk or ride. If they still will not give up the object – do not struggle – the aggression will only worsen. Instead, use that information to avoid future problems. Some dogs simply cannot have certain toys or any food toy, bone, antler, rawhide, pig’s ear, or fancy biscuit. If your dog will trade you for the biscuit or toy, you can start to teach “drop it”. In this scenario – the dog has toy that she guards, you offer a piece of cheese as a trade, she drops the toy and you take it – without aggression – as you give the cheese and say “Good drop!”. If the dog becomes aggressive as you go to retrieve the toy – stop. Avoidance is safer until you can get help. If you can safely trade,

you can practice returning the toy, asking for “drop it”, giving the reward and repeat. This process teaches your dog that relinquishing the object does not mean losing it and that you are a reliable human. Another option is to provide many toys at once so that one does not have so much value.

This process is trickier with food since the need for food is an evolutionarily hard-wired one. Depending on your dog’s history and how aggressive they become with the food, food toy, bone, et cetera, it may be easier for you and kinder for them to avoid those items so that you avoid the anxiety and worry driving the aggression. If you have a zero tolerance for risk, this can be a safe and humane strategy. Don’t feel that dogs ‘need’ real bones – they do not.

Real Bones Can Pose Serious Health Risks to Your Dog

Bones – both raw and cooked depending on size and type – may pose potentially serious health problems for your dog. Bones can cause teeth to break or crack, and pieces of bones can lacerate the mouth and block the trachea (preventing breathing), esophagus (preventing swallowing) or intestines (causing a blockage). Common problems resulting from eating bones and some food toys like rawhides may include constipation, vomiting, diarrhea, rectal bleeding, peritonitis (if the bone perforates the intestinal tract), and death. Raw, uncooked bones have the added concerns of potentially causing *Salmonella* or *E.coli* infections which can sicken the entire family – humans, cats, dogs, horses and pet birds.

Bones are often given to promote dental health. You can better keep gums healthy and reduce tartar while providing mental stimulation through chewing by using true chew toys developed for this purpose. You can also brush your dog’s teeth!!! Tooth brushing has hidden benefits: it can be a great bonding experience for you and your dog, dog/cat toothpaste comes flavoured so it’s a great reward. And if you could but now suddenly cannot brush teeth – you have an early warning to go see your veterinarian. For people who cannot brush their dog’s or cat’s teeth, there are dental diets. *With any new toy or treat, supervise your dog while they chew to ensure that they are not breaking off smaller parts of the toy/treat that may pose a choking hazard.*



Aggression-free dog enjoying Kong toy filled with peanut butter



Same dog, remains calm and relaxed when approached by a curious cat

Recommendations

Initial treatment for aggression in response to approaching or trying to take any object or food should be avoidance. You can then consider if you want to and can teach the dog to learn to give you the object, on cue, for a reward. Since avoidance is safe, no one must treat this condition and when food is involved, it is easiest and may be safest to just avoid giving items triggering aggression. Such decisions are best made in a discussion with your veterinarian about any aggressive behaviour you observe.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).