

Dog's Food Aggression Takes Time to Fix

Using smaller food incentives, you can train your dog to eat more comfortably.

By September B. Morn

Q. Our 2-year-old neutered male Miniature Poodle mix, Max, came to us with food aggression issues. When we feed Max and Barney, our 10-year-old neutered male, Max stiffens and growls at him. We leash Max on one side of the counter to eat, and Barney eats on the other side. When Barney finishes eating and walks away, Max goes nuts if he sees him. He tries to get at Barney and acts like he wants to kill him. A behaviorist told us you can't fight aggression with aggression and we agree, but we think Max needs very stern management. What would you suggest?

A. You and the behaviorist are right that adding aggression to aggression generally results in more aggression, not less. And you're also right about the need for strong management. From your description of Max's behavior, it sounds like his food issue is only around dogs, not humans. This is fortunate, because that's the easier situation of the two to manage.

Leashing Max as you've been doing keeps Barney safe, but it doesn't prevent Max's frustration or his fierce display of aggression. Being tethered may actually increase Max's feeling of vulnerability and increase the drama of his food-guarding. I'd suggest feeding Max in a separate room from Barney, with a solid wall between them, so they can't see each other at all. Separate Max from Barney before you start preparing their food, and release him only after both dogs have finished and the dishes have been picked up.

For whatever reason, Max doesn't seem to believe there's enough food in the world for both him and Barney. Max needs to learn there's plenty of food to go around, and he can earn treats by doing things you ask. Do this by having both dogs take turns practicing tricks and obedience skills together and earning food rewards.

Start with a baby gate between them in a doorway, to keep the dogs separated and prevent squabbles. If that's too close for Max to handle without food guarding, use a room with two doorways and gate both doors. You'll occupy the double-gated room in the middle and each dog will be in one of the rooms off that one. You can walk from one dog to the other to give attention and rewards, while they stay behind their respective gates -- separated by a whole room.

Have each dog in turn perform a trick or skill you've taught them, or use this opportunity to teach them new skills. Reward each dog for their trick, saying the dog's name before you hand him his treat. Hearing their own names before getting the treat lets both dogs know for sure whom each treat is for.

If Max makes a fuss when it's Barney's turn, ignore him. After you give Barney his turn, if Max is still fussing, sit down and read a magazine until he stops. Then go to Max and give him his turn to do a trick and earn a treat.

Gradually work with the dogs closer together. Don't rush this. Let Max's level of reactivity to Barney be your guide. Don't work closer until Max can handle it without becoming anxious or reactive.

Until they can be side by side in the same room doing tricks for treats, continue to feed them dinner in separate rooms.