



Food Bowl Desensitization

This program can take four to eight months (or longer) to rehabilitate a serious food guarder—even then your dog may never be completely trustworthy. If at any point you are fearful or feel inadequate to deal with your dog, call a qualified professional trainer or behaviorist. This program should be implemented only by adults or very responsible older teens.

Do not move to the next phase before the minimum time indicated, or before the dog's demeanor is perfectly calm at the previous phase.

Also, keep in mind that following the program outlined below DOES NOT guarantee your safety.

Phase 1: No Bowl (one-two weeks)

Place the dog's daily meal in a bowl on a counter or shelf in his feeding room. Include some high value treats as part of the meal. Schedule several feeding sessions throughout the day. Feed him one-quarter to one-tenth of his day's ration in each session, a piece at a time, by hand. If he lunges aggressively at your hand while feeding, tether him and feed him his meals, a piece at a time, by tossing them from just out of reach. Wait until he is sitting quietly each time to toss him another piece.

Phase 2: Empty Bowl, single pieces (two-four weeks)

Schedule several feeding sessions throughout the day. Place the dog's daily meal in a bowl on a counter in his feeding room. Place his empty bowl on the ground at your feet. Alternate between feeding him several pieces from your hand, a piece at a time, and dropping several pieces of food, a piece at a time, into his bowl from waist height. Wait until he has finished each piece before dropping the next.

Phase 3: Empty Bowl, multiple pieces (two-four weeks)

During several feeding sessions throughout the day, place the dog's daily meal in a bowl on a counter or shelf in his feeding room. Place his empty bowl on the ground at your feet. Drop several pieces of food into his food bowl and wait until he has finished them. Then feed him several pieces, one at a time, from your hand. Now drop several more pieces into his bowl. While he is eating those, drop more treats, one at a time, into his bowl from waist height.

Phase Four: Two partial bowls (two-four weeks)

Again, schedule several feedings throughout the day, and place the dog's meal in a bowl on a counter or shelf in his feeding room. Put a handful of food in each of two bowls and place one bowl on the floor. Put lower-value food into the bowls; save the higher value food for food dropping. If you cannot safely put down the bowl in your dog's presence, tether him, put him on a sit-stay, or shut him out of the room while you put the bowl down. While he is eating from the first bowl, place the second bowl on the floor a safe distance away. "Safe" will depend on your dog, and could be as much as 10-15 feet or more. Err on the side of caution. Return to the first bowl and drop treats into it as he continues to eat. When he has finished the first bowl, stop dropping treats and direct him to the second bowl. While he is eating from the second bowl, return to the first and pick it up. Continue to drop treats into the bowl from which he is eating.

Over the next two to four weeks of this phase, very gradually- a few inches at a time- place the bowls closer and closer together. Watch for signs of tension or aggression. If you see any, you have closed the distance too quickly; go back to the distance between bowls where he was relaxed and work at that distance for several days before moving the bowls closer together again.

Phase Five: Several Partial Bowls (two-four weeks)

Repeat the previous phase, using several bowls (up to six). You can prepare all the bowls at the same time and set them on a counter, but place them on the floor one at a time, while he is eating from the first bowl. Continue to drop treats into the bowl he is eating from, and occasionally pick up an empty one that is a safe distance from the dog. During this phase, reduce the number of meals to two or three. Also look for opportunities outside of feeding time to drop treats near the dog when he is in possession of other reasonably valuable items.

Phase Six: Calling the Dog (two-four weeks)

Repeat Phase Five, except try to call the dog to you from a distance of six to eight feet just as he finishes the food in a bowl. Have the other bowls set out so he must pass you to go to another bowl. Be sure to give him a very high value treat when he comes to you. Gradually start asking him to come to you before he finishes the food in the bowl- first, when he is almost done, then when there is more and more left. As long as he stays relaxed, gradually move closer to the food bowl he is eating from before you call him.

Practice this phase for at least one full week before moving closer to him. Also, look for opportunities outside of feeding time to call him to you to feed him high value treats when he is in possession of other reasonable valuable items.

Phase Seven: Adding People (two-four weeks)

Starting back at Phase One, have a second person repeat the exercises. This should be another person who is close to the dog, not a child and not a stranger. Have the person move through the phases, spending up to a week at each phase or longer if necessary. If he is doing well with a second person, add a third, then a fourth. Be sure to use people who are well-educated as to their training duties, and able to follow directions.

Phase Eight: Coming out of the closet (two-six weeks, for the rest of the dog's life)

Again, starting back at Phase One, move the food bowl exercises out of the dog's feeding room into other areas of the house: the kitchen, the dining room, the den, etc. Assuming the training has been progressing well, you should be able to move through the phases relatively quickly. Continue to look for other real-life resource-relevant opportunities to reinforce the message that your presence means more good stuff.

Remember that, depending on the success of your desensitization program, your resource-guarding dog may never be totally reliable in the presence of valuable items.

For the rest of your dog's life, always be aware of the environment and be prepared to intervene if there is a potential risk.