

# behavior modification protocols

One of a series of ASPCA® Behavior Modification Protocols developed by Emily Weiss, Ph.D., CAAB



## food guarding program

The goal is to have the dog learn to be relaxed around the food bowl, lifting his head and even backing up from the bowl when you approach.

### identifying dogs for the program:

- Dog is SAFER™ “1” or “2” on all parts of the SAFER™ assessment other than the food behavior.
- The dog does not shoulder rub or body slam during any part of the assessment.
- The dog does not body-block, place foot in bowl, or urinate in bowl.
- The dog was assessed with two toys and no possession-type behaviors were observed.

### before you begin:

- Be sure the dogs are given enrichment and walks daily.
- All dogs entering the food program should be on free feed (access to a full bowl of food at all times) for at least 24 hours before starting this program. Dogs must be free fed consistently. If they are not on free feed, the protocol is much less likely to be effective.

### program instructions:

1. Give dog some mildly valuable food such as a dry kibble that is a bit tastier than what he has as free feed. Prepare some tasty treats (balled up canned food works well). Approach the food bowl; and as long as he is not aggressive (i.e. stiffening, hard stare, guarding bowl), drop in a treat. If he displays aggressive behaviors, wait until he is done, refill his bowl and present it to him again. During your first session you may need to fill the bowl a few times before you are able to capture a relaxation in body.
2. After 5-7 repetitions, you can now expect him to lift his head when you approach — even just a tiny bit — before dropping in the next treat.
3. When he is reliably lifting his head for food, you will begin to bend down, as if to lift his bowl, and then drop the treat. Watch carefully for stiff behavior.
4. Increase the amount you bend.
5. At this point, you should now be able to take the bowl and exchange for something better.
6. Practice with at least two other Assessors, in two other physical spaces before the dog is placed on the adoption floor. In other words, the dog should be tested in at least four different spaces (one being his home kennel) by a total of three or more people.
7. Daily behavior logs must be kept for each dog on the program.

All dogs placed for adoption from this program must be clearly identified so adopters can be properly counseled, go home with the food-guarding program and be flagged for follow-up. Plan on a minimum of two 4-5 minute sessions a day.

**when the dog is adopted:** Review the “Food Program” instructions with the adopter which can be found in the Reproducible Forms and Templates section. Remember to follow up with the adopter at three days, three weeks and three months post-adoption.

### food program

ASPCA®

#### Congratulations! You have adopted a new family member.

As your adoption counselor discussed with you, your dog displayed some food aggression issues while in the shelter. What does this mean? It means that your dog may be more likely to show aggression around his food than some other dogs. Food-aggressive dogs may bite when they perceive that someone is trying to take their food. While we conducted a successful behavior modification program with the dog during his time with us, we suggest that you continue this work with the dog when you take him home. Food aggression is both treatable and controllable. We suggest you follow the plan below, beginning the moment your dog comes into your home.



#### the plan:

- **Food time should never be made into an event.** Do not get the dog riled up for dinner.
- **Be sure your dog sits and waits for the food bowl.** For the first few days, you might want to keep the bowl on the dog for this exercise. As the dog sits, you will bend toward the dog with the bowl. If the dog gets up, stand up and have the dog sit again.
- **Put small amounts of food in the bowl.** As the dog finishes the first bowl, place more food in the bowl. Feed the normal amount of food, but do so in small amounts.
- **Feed one-half of the dog's food out of a food-dispensing toy such as the Buster Cube™** This will not only help with food issues, but it will also help keep your dog busy in body and mind.
- **When your dog is interacting with the food-dispensing toy or eating food from the bowl, you can teach him that when he leaves the bowl or toy to look at you, he will get something even better.** This is a very important rule for essential dogs: by placing a toy aside in the bowl or food-dispensing toy. Let the dog eat for a moment, then walk over with a tasty piece of cheese or other highly desirable food item. Say the dog's name. If he lifts his head, praise him and give him the food item.
- **Trade.** While this game is similar to what is written above, here you are not only asking the dog to lift his head, but to let you have one object for another more desirable one. Place a tasty treat that the dog loves in your pocket, and begin by giving the dog a boring toy — one that the dog finds only marginally interesting. (We want the dog to quickly understand the game as well as avoid any aggression, so we must begin by giving the dog something that is not highly desirable.) Once the dog has this item for a moment, take the tasty treat out of your pocket and calmly say “Trade.” Draw the dog toward you with the treat, and let him nibble the treat while you pick up the boring toy. When he is done with the treat, have him sit and give back the toy. We want your dog to learn that you always have something better and that he can trust you.

If you are unable to do the preceding exercises, we suggest you choose another dog to adopt. While we cannot 100 percent predict the future, research does show that dogs who display food issues in the shelter are more likely to display the same behaviors in the home. We want you to be safe and for the dog to have the opportunity to be able to work through his issues. Please take the time to ask yourself if you are ready to take on a bit of a project.