

Why Classical Conditioning Changes Food Bowl Guarding & Growling

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Many of us may be unaware that we use classical conditioning a lot - whenever we wish to help a dog or a child or anyone have a pleasant experience. We pull out all the stops to "create" a pleasant atmosphere. Restaurants are aware of these powerful forces when they design a lovely ambiance -- not just for eating, but also for a "dining experience." Rather than using verbal cues to reach the dog's conscious mind, instead we "associate" pleasant, happy times, which for dogs is often high-value luscious food treats to create a ***positive emotional response*** to a particular situation. This is classical conditioning – associating an event with something good that will follow.

Food bowl growling is a common form of resource guarding and can be changed very effectively using classical conditioning. When doing private consultations with families whose dog is growling at them while he is eating it usually turns out that not all members of the family are being threatened. I often find that the adult man of the house can go right up and take the bowl. Yet other members of the family (female adults and children) get growled at. The dog is growling to say, "don't take what is mine". The dog lets the adult male take the bowl because he believes he can't win if he growls. The dog knows he can threaten everyone else and they will stay away. That's why he is growling. But if we use classical conditioning we can make it easy for anyone to take food (or toys) because we are going to show this dog that he will get something better by giving up his resource (and then he'll get the resource back as well). BUT to make this training work, then **all** family members have to participate in pairing a good food treat with taking the bowl. Even if the dog would defer to some members, everyone needs to use the classical conditioning because our goal is to change how this dog feels about his resources. Now he feels he has to guard or he'll lose it. When we are finished reconditioning he'll be convinced that he never loses. So it is critical if you want to successfully prevent a biting accident over food that no one ever "bully" or "dominate" the dog into giving up a resource. Instead your goal will be to show the dog that he can't lose when he calmly and quietly shares anything with people. To do this means a period of reconditioning where the dog ALWAYS gets something good for giving up something good – no exceptions because we don't want the dog to feel threatened by anyone – we want the dog to willingly choose to give up his prize.

When we train using classical conditioning, we're attempting to reach a part of the brain that is more primitive than conscious thought. Brenda Aloff calls this the "lizard brain". The dog has no conscious awareness that it is being conditioned. Notice the phrase "being conditioned." We simply can't help our response; this physiological response happens despite our conscious wishes. Thus, when we attempt to use classical conditioning to help a dog form a more pleasant emotional association in the presence of people approaching their food bowl, we're thinking in Pavlovian terms. We use food (high-value powerful food treats) because eating them helps the dog feel good. That "feeling good" is a physiological response. So when you approach the food bowl and toss some sort of yummy treat you are conditioning a positive feeling about people approaching a valued resource.

All of us have been conditioned to behave like the growling dog about something we value. Let me give you my example. I remember when my dad - bless him - would always reach over and take what I had just cut up and start to eat it himself. It didn't take me long to figure out to just cut one piece and keep it on my fork, Then nobody could take it. Years later as an adult and mother, my young daughter reached over and took a piece of food off my plate while I was

eating. I had forgotten all about my father and his stealing my food, but her action brought back all those memories and it was hard for me to NOT slap at her hand. "My daughter, whom I would die for, had triggered a conditioned "lizard brain" response. What had my Dad taught me? To protect what was mine! I had never thought about how he had conditioned me. Until my daughter reached out for that piece of food I had forgotten how I felt – but I nearly acted harshly because of that childhood conditioning.. Imagine how differently I'd feel if instead of taking food from my plate my Dad had instead put something wonderful from his plate onto mine and then asked if he could trade for a piece from my plate. I wouldn't be a closet food bowl guarder!

Our dogs are no different than we are in terms of how they learn. And certainly they are no different than we are in how important food and toys are to them. This means we always have to think about how to handle our dog when around it's food bowl or when it's eating special things it's found. Clearly grabbing and just taking it away through intimidation will only condition a "guarding" reaction, which you'll see as growling or biting. Dominating an animal to get something they value may work for a few people, but conditioning a pleasant "trading" emotion to taking valued objects is both more pleasant and it creates a safe pet for any child or adult to be around.

Trading something you like for something you like is win-win training. It is fun for everyone, it is humane, it creates safe dogs that will never choose biting as a response to a careless child, and it builds the kind of friendship with our dog that we all seek.

Classically conditioning a positive emotional response to humans approaching when eating or chewing a toy is really simple.

1. We toss yummy treats at him while he is eating.
2. He can eat the treat and go back to his food or toy.
3. Once he anticipates our tossing something good by stopping eating and looking for the yummy treat, we can begin to train him to briefly "swap" our treat for his food. ALWAYS giving the food (or toy) back after he has eaten the treat.
4. Over time we can exchange our treat for his treat without having to give back what we took because we have changed how he feels about his valued resources. Now he believes that he can't lose when humans approach.

Intimidating a dog can "work" for some adults, but it won't train a dog that will refrain from growling or biting to guard what it values. Only reconditioning a positive emotional association by everyone in the family will do that.