

Food Respect - Don't Steal and Don't bite

There are many things that Rafe can't do but there are two things he's good at – he won't steal food from a plate and he won't bite your fingers when you feed him. I think both of these things are SO important in the family situation and also for when your dog goes out in public.

Through the Boxer Club and Obedience Club, Rafe and I are often out doing demonstrations, competing, and meeting the public at Pet Expos and Fun Days. In these situations I can control 'his' behaviour but the big unknown is what the 'people' will do. So many people (and not only children) have no idea how to approach, greet or talk to a strange dog. I guess there is an assumption that if a dog is at a public event that it must be trustworthy but there are many situations it might not be. People just walk up and start patting the dog on the head many with small children walking or in strollers and many of the children (and adults) will be eating or holding food at the time. Many many dogs would be tempted to steal the food and in the process could bite the hand holding it. Rafe usually settles on licking the children to see what flavour they are.

I usually eat meals in front of the TV on the couch. If the phone rings or have to get up for any reason I put my food plate down on the floor (no coffee table). As Rafe lives in the house, I have to be sure that he won't steal my food so I have taught him the Leave Exercise.

One day I cooked some pizza and I took it out of the oven on its aluminium foil and put it on a paper plate to eat dinner. When I was finished I put the plate down on the floor so Rafe could eat the crusts I left for him. But he wouldn't touch it. I took the pizza off the plate and put it down just on the foil and he still wouldn't touch it. So I had to put it in his dinner plate before he would eat. I had taught him not to take food from my plate and it was torturing him but he didn't do it.



SO often we hear stories of dogs “counter surfing” (jumping up at or onto a table or counter) to steal food and most people will laugh and think it’s amusing. Sorry but I think it’s horrifying! Apart from the obvious hygiene issues – what happens if you have something poisonous on the counter? That a dog can take anything it likes is downright dangerous. It also shows a complete lack of respect. And dogs that are stealers are quite often gobblers – gushing down food as fast as possible before it’s detected. So even if the item isn’t poisonous, sometimes sheer volume can make the dog sick or (hopefully not) cause a torsion or reaction.

It’s so important that your dog doesn’t steal food and it’s quite simple to teach. We have posted an article on the “[Leave Exercise](#)” . Follow those instructions and you should have success. Plus remember that a dog is still a dog and even a well-trained dog will succumb to temptation if it’s blatant enough so keep temptations under control as much as possible.

But the other side of this message is to teach the dog to be gentle. You don’t want a dog snatching for food, even a light nip on the fingers could be very painful for a child. And heaven forbid that the dog should knock a child over or fight for a treat. In Australia, any doctor or hospital that treats a dog bite must report it to the police for investigation so lack of training could end up with a dog declared dangerous or seized and put to sleep.

Here are a few quick tips:

Use your voice and tone of voice for calming effect. Don’t be yelling EAT EAT – that will just ramp up the dog. Use a moderate and gentle voice while feeding or treating and the dog should act accordingly. Use the word “gentle” in a soft voice while holding the treat very close.

Don’t hold the food too far from the dog or too high – hold it right at mouth level so the dog just has to open his mouth and the treat is right there.

Don’t withdraw food – holding it out to the dog and then, as the dog approaches, snatching the food away. That will just cause the dog to lunge forward and that is more likely to end up in bite than anything else.

I hold a treat with a very small section showing so the dog doesn’t need to take a big bite at the treat, they only have to nibble for it or lick it from your fingers.

Don’t have dogs competing for food. If you have more than one dog, make sure their meal times are secure and they don’t have to compete to get fed. Then they can eat at their leisure and don’t have to gobble. This will not only teach them food respect but also hopefully prevent any effects from eating too fast.

Teach your dog to accept food being taken away – don't let your dog get too protective of their food. Teach them early that you or any human can take their food and they must not snatch or retaliate to get it back. This is very important when small children are in the house as they don't understand territorialism and could get too close to a dog when it is eating or try to touch the food. If you are going to teach this to an older dog be very careful that you understand how the dog will react before you just wander up and take its food away. Go slowly with an older dog and make your voice and body language very UNthreatening and it might help to have a treat ready to replace the food you are removing. Always be sure that a dog knows that if you take its food that it will get it back soonish so it is more likely not to fight when it's confident it isn't being punished.

Teach children (especially) and all family members to respect the dog. You wouldn't like if someone walked up and took away the food you were eating or were standing too close while you were trying to eat. Your dog won't like it either. Teach the dog to accept food being removed (above) but also teach family not to do it just for fun and not to stir a dog while it is trying to eat. We ask that our dogs respect us but we need to respect them as well.

And most of all, remember that dogs are dogs and have their own brain chemistry that is different to ours. Don't put your dog in a position where it feels the need to protect itself or its food, don't tease a dog so that it's tempted to snatch or gobble. We sometimes do ask a lot of our dogs – let's just not ask too much of them when we don't have to.