

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

WHY NOT FREE-FEED DOGS?

Nancy M. Kelly, B.S., CPDT-KA

In our relationships with our dogs, one of the most important ways we establish boundaries and make household rules clear is to control the resources. When we control the food that dogs require for sustenance, we set ourselves up to be able to ask our dogs to do things in order to get that food. We automatically control the food from the beginning because we choose which of the many available diets to feed the dog and we purchase and bring home the food at no small outlay of time, energy and money. The dog doesn't understand these first steps, though. What he understands is either (1) "There's a big bowl of food which is always full and I can eat however much whenever I want; it's mine, and I may want to guard it from others;" or (2) "There are established mealtimes in this household, and my owner prepares my food and wants me to eat it, and I do because it's super-fun to watch and anticipate eating, and I earn this privilege by doing a trick or two. Mom may give me bits of food and treats anytime she wants throughout the day, and it's always when I do certain behaviors she likes; perhaps sit, lie down, or fetch the ball." You buy the food, but do you communicate to your dog that it's your food and you want him to enjoy what he needs to survive and thrive, or do you let him control his own diet?

Food is one of our most valuable resources to use in training our dogs because all dogs must eat in order to live. If a dog wants or needs something, we can use it to reinforce behaviors we like. Please don't think that I'm advocating starving your pet! I'm not even talking about fasting your dog, except perhaps in those cases where the dog has been free-fed for a long time, coupled with having very few boundaries or household rules, and has developed behavior issues like resource-guarding that are a problem for the household. In these cases, as we teach a dog that his owner controls the food, he may miss a meal simply because he chooses to walk away from his food when it's given to him. A dog very rarely misses more than a meal or two; it's a quick lesson, and the benefits of teaching a dog to eat his meals when they're offered far outweigh the disadvantage of having to wonder whether your dog is starving to death. Scientific research has shown us that a healthy dog will not starve himself to death, and if you need to go to these extremes of teaching your dog to eat, you're likely having serious behavior issues that will be much easier to change once your dog understands that you control the food.

If a dog learns to eat what you put in his bowl, then you won't have an issue if the time comes that he needs a special diet for health reasons. By teaching him to eat his meal when it's offered, you'll remove all but a hint of a chance that he'll refuse to eat because you've prevented or replaced his habit of eating at his own whim. You've taught him a new habit: that there's more involved with mealtime than examining the food in his bowl to see if he'd like to eat it right now. There's the process of anticipation, of having time to salivate like Pavlov's dogs did from the time the guys in the white lab coats entered the room and rang the bell until the meat powder was given to the dogs to eat. Consider this to be like the time you spend thinking about

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

how great your meal will be at a nice restaurant as you drive over, get seated, explore the menu, smell the aroma, and finally see the beautifully arranged plate served to you. As you ask your dog for some of the behaviors he's learned, like a "sit" or "down," or perhaps a trick, maybe to bring you his food bowl or go in his crate to have his food served, you build up the reinforcement process. Each cue to perform a behavior reinforces the previous behavior because your dog has learned that each behavior gets him closer to the food. Your dog is already enjoying the process of having his behavior reinforced, which culminates in the delivery of his food bowl. He'll be much more likely to ravenously eat whatever you've served him because you've helped him to develop the habit of doing so, and he's done it many times by the time you've reached the point of giving him a special diet, if that day ever comes.

When your dog knows you have this great magical power to make food appear and to offer it to him, you can use your magical power to make food appear just at the moment when he's done something wonderful. Say you've been trying to teach your dog to relieve himself out in the grass: when you produce that special tasty treat just as he's finishing up, it has more value because he knows there's not a big bowl of food available for him to eat anytime he chooses. If you've had trouble luring your dog with food as you work to teach him to lie down, you may find that he's more interested in working with you now, likely because the food has more value when it's not just sitting around waiting for him to eat it; it's only available when you offer it.

I'm a fan of using high-value treats like tasty bits of chicken or cheese for training in high-distraction situations; but if you control your dog's food, you'll find that for training around the house with few distractions, you can use your dog's regular food. Make sure to subtract the amount you use for training from his mealtime ration so you don't risk packing on the pounds.