

BEGGING BOWSERS

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More times than I care to count, new Peaceable Paws students have resisted my suggestions for using foods like canned chicken, turkey franks and string cheese as training treats. “If I feed my dog people food,” they insist, “he will learn to beg.”

What kind of bizarre logic is this? “Begging” is nothing more than focused attention – a behavior I encourage my students to strive for in every positive training session. A dog learns to give his handler undivided attention in a training session because the behavior is consistently reinforced in that environment. Good things happen when he looks at his owner – a Click! and treat, verbal praise, petting, or something else that is very rewarding to the dog. Since all living things repeat behaviors that are rewarding to them, dogs who are consistently reinforced with good stuff for looking at their owners will look at their owners more and more. Food is a primary motivator because we all need it to survive – humans as well as dogs. Therefore, food, intended for humans or otherwise, can be a very strong tool to teach focused attention to our dogs, whether in the training center or at the dining room table.

The behavior previously known as “begging” (henceforth known as “attention”) is largely dependent on context. It has little or nothing to do with whether the manufacturer of the food reward is Hills, Betty Crocker, Purina, Burger King, Science Diet, Morning Star Farms, Waltham’s, or Oscar Meyer. If you sit at your dining room table – or on the sofa watching television – and feed Bowser pieces of doggie jerky while you eat steak or a T.V. dinner, he will learn to focus his attention on you while you are eating at the table or on the sofa, even though you are feeding him “dog” food, not “people” food. If your dog shares a noted ex-president’s well-known disdain for broccoli – a vegetable commonly viewed as people food – and you only try to feed him broccoli from the table for giving you his attention, he will find that giving you his attention at the table is singularly unrewarding; he’s not likely to “beg” for broccoli. Conversely, if you use broccoli for Bowser’s training sessions, your efforts to gain his attention are likely to meet with little success. The short answer to preventing Bowser from begging at the table is simple. Don’t feed him from the table. If the begging behavior no longer pays off, he will eventually stop doing it. If you want to feed him people food, then put the table scraps in his food bowl, or cut them up into bite-sized morsels and refrigerate them in a plastic bag for use as training treats.

The Blurring Line

Once upon a time, there was no such thing as commercial dog food. Bowser was routinely fed table scraps, stale bread, potato peelings, and other trimmings from human meal preparation, as well as any other bits of edible stuff he could scrounge around the farm. The dog food industry has come into its own in the last 50 years, primarily utilizing leftovers from the slaughter industry and hiring extensive research departments to create their scientifically-developed, processed kibble, while spending large marketing budgets to effectively convince dog-owning consumers that feeding their dogs anything less than a commercially prepared diet was irresponsible neglect. In recent years, the pendulum has begun to swing back, with a growing number of dog owners converting partly or exclusively to feeding their dogs “raw” or “natural” diets consisting, at least in part of – you guessed it – fresh meats, fruits and vegetables. In other words, “people food.”

Prior to the emergence of the commercial dog food industry, people who fed their dogs from the table ended up with dogs who “begged” at the table. Likewise, wherever you as a dog owner are today on the commercial dog food – raw/natural diet continuum, if you reinforce Bowser for attention at the table by feeding him from your plate, you will encourage him to offer the behavior of “table attention.”

Positive Three-Step Procedure for Changing a Behavior

Perhaps you have inadvertently already taught Bowser to “beg” at the table and now you want him to stop. You can do this positively, without the use of the various verbal or physical punishments that are advocated by some training disciplines. Use the following Three-Step Procedure for Changing Behavior to teach Bowser that attention at the table will no longer pay off. This procedure, properly applied, works to change *any* behavior your dog offers you that you don’t like.

Step 1: Define the behavior you want the dog *to do*.

Step 2: Prevent the dog from being rewarded for the behavior you *don’t* want.

Step 3: Consistently reward the behavior you *do* want.

Let’s take a detailed look at how these steps would be applied to Bowser’s “table attention” behavior:

Step 1 – Define the behavior you want.

It is generally a more effective training technique to focus on the behavior you *want* the dog to offer rather than the behavior you *don’t want*. In order to do that, you have to know what behavior you want instead. For example, you might prefer that Bowser lie on his rug next to the television during dinner, or retire to his crate in the hallway outside the dining room. Have all family members agree on the desired behavior in order to ensure consistency. Somewhere away from the table is preferable to under the table where bits of food may fall and reinforce “table attention” by accident, and where the temptation to slip him a bite now and then may be too great for some family members to resist, especially children.

Step 2 – Prevent him from being rewarded for the inappropriate behavior.

This means *never* feeding Bowser from the table. Ever. You, your spouse, your children, Aunt Mildred, Grandpa Joe, your boss – *nobody* feeds him from the table. Nobody. Ever. A behavior that is rewarded occasionally is said to be on a variable schedule of reinforcement. This is the slot machine concept. A gambler will feed quarters into a slot machine for hours, trusting that it will pay off eventually. Bowser is probably already conditioned to a long variable schedule; he knows if he just waits at the table long enough, sooner or later a tasty morsel will come his way. This makes the behavior very resistant to extinction – Bowser will hold out hope for a very long time that his own personal slot machine will pay off. If Aunt Mildred visits three months into the training program and slips Bowser a bit of her filet mignon, she has just reinforced his faith in the eventual slot machine payoff, and taught him that the variable period may be at least as long as three months.

Bowser may become very demanding at first when you stop rewarding his table attention behavior, especially if you have been a reliable reinforcer in the past. You will need to be prepared to resist his beguiling and persistent attempts to get you to pay off and steel yourself to ignore his antics. Looking at, speaking to or touching him are all rewarding to him, so if he barks, nudges, whines, paws, or engages in any other behavior designed to remind you that you are supposed to be feeding him, you will need to simply

turn away from him. If necessary, stand up and walk away – taking your plate with you if there’s any chance he will help himself while your back is turned. When he is quiet you can sit down again, but be prepared to ignore or walk away from his next appeal. Any attention you give him, even something as seemingly benign as eye contact, can reinforce his inappropriate demanding behaviors. The behavior may, in fact, get measurably worse before it gets better. Dogs sometimes go through an “extinction burst” – akin to a temper tantrum – before the behavior finally extinguishes. It’s as if Bowser is positive that if he just tries *hard enough* he will get you to respond as you have in the past. Don’t make the mistake of giving in during an extinction burst! If you do, you will have reinforced his new, over-the-top level of inappropriate behavior and he is likely to escalate to that level more quickly the next time.

You may need some management tools to help prevent Bowser from being inadvertently reinforced. If you have an infant who flings peas from her high chair, you will need to crate or tether Bowser a distance from the table so he can’t take advantage of the baby’s generosity. A baby gate across the doorway can also keep Bowser at a safe distance from flung peas while still allowing him to be a part of the family dinner ritual. Crates, tethers and baby gates can also remove his demand behavior from your lap and allow you to enjoy your meal with fewer interruptions.

Step 3 – Consistently reinforce the desired behavior.

Bowser’s undesirable behavior will extinguish much more quickly if you help him fill the resulting behavior vacuum by consistently rewarding him for the one you want him to offer instead. We call this “teaching an incompatible behavior.” Bowser gives you his focused attention at the table because that has paid off for him reliably in the past. If that behavior suddenly stops being rewarded, and an incompatible behavior – such as lying on his rug in the corner of the room – becomes *very* rewarding, it makes it easier for him to give up his attachment to the table behavior. When a slot machine stops paying off, the gambler switches to a different machine that promises a higher payout. So will Bowser.

Go To Your Rug

It is easier to accomplish Step 3 if you teach Bowser a “Go To Your Rug” exercise separate from dinnertime at first. Set a comfortable dog bed or throw rug where you want his spot to be, a fair distance from the dinner table. Say “Rug” or “Go to your rug” and lead him to his spot. Have him lie down on the rug, then Click! or say “Yes” and feed him a tasty treat. (If he does not lie down easily for you on cue, just Click! and treat for going to his rug at first, work on the “down” separately, and put them together later.) Click! and treat him several times for staying on his rug – you want him to understand that *staying* on the rug is a very rewardable behavior, not just *going* to his rug. From time to time throughout the day, you can also secretly drop treats onto his rug, so he never knows when he will find a yummy surprise there, and if you happen to find him lying on his rug of his own accord, be sure to give him an extra special Click! and treat. The more you can get the message across to him that lying on his rug is a very good thing, the better.

When you first incorporate this exercise into the actual dinner routine, you may need to use a tether to prevent him from reverting to his old table attention behavior. When you tether him, give him a stuffed Kong or some other delectable goodie that will hold his attention for the duration of dinner. Occasionally during the meal you can tell

him “yes” and walk over to his rug and feed him a treat – human food or doggie treat. As long as he is getting rewarded for lying quietly on his rug and not for hanging out at the table, it will not encourage him to beg. Eventually you will be able to remove the tether, and if you remember to occasionally reward him for his good rug behavior, he will be happy to stay there for dinner.

Here’s a training secret that is not well known outside of canine competition circles. Lots of obedience competitors teach their dogs to focus attention on the owner’s face by tucking pieces of hotdog into their cheeks and spitting one at the dog from time to time. They becoming walking hotdog slot machines, and their dogs cling to their sides, watching intently for the next piece of hotdog to come flying through the air. Next time you admire the rapt attention that dogs are offering their handlers as they heel precisely next to them in the obedience competition ring, remind yourself that many of these dogs are simply begging. The next time you find Bowser begging at the table, you can tell yourself that he is simply demonstrating his great aptitude as a potential obedience competitor. Then return to Step 3, and go back to rewarding him consistently for that incompatible, desirable behavior.