

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

Food thief!

One cannot underestimate the importance of food to dogs. It's a relationship that goes way back in time, as it does with all animals, including us. Food means survival, not just of the individual, but of the species as a whole. With dogs, it is also related to power – you control the food, you control the pack. Alpha wolves in the wild decide when each pack member can eat. They don't just do this because they're nasty; they do this to ensure the pack's survival. And of course, the pack's survival depends upon the strength and health of the alpha – so the alpha eats first.

Why then does your little Fluffy steal food from your table or countertop? It's probably not because she's hungry. If your dog is fed a good-quality diet and is a healthy weight (meaning you can feel the ribs through a necessary layer of fat), it's unlikely that your dog is starving. With winter approaching, most dogs do get hungrier and it's a good idea to give them a little extra food (if they're a healthy weight), about 10% extra, so that they have added protection against the cold. But the rest of the year? There are a few reasons why dogs become food thieves.

Firstly, what food are they stealing? I know with my dogs, the target is cat food. This is because cat food has a higher level of protein in it than dog food, and the dogs can smell it (incidentally, this is the same reason dogs like eating cat poo!). Protein is irresistible and it's a high value food. Protein means survival. Another thing dogs go after is anything with a high fat content – again, they can smell the fat. Good quality dog food is coated in a thin layer of fat (that's why it feels a little sticky) to make it more appealing to dogs. Fat means survival as well.

What about those indiscriminate dogs that try and steal just about anything? Well, most people would label them 'naughty'. It might be that your dog has developed a taste for something, or that they enjoy the texture of the food. For example, some dogs just can't get enough carrots! But there's also something else going on. Recall that the alpha member of a pack controls food. Some dogs don't steal food because they necessarily want to eat it – they steal it in an attempt to have greater control over the food, and thus the pack as a whole. This is the reason that dogs sometimes steal each other's food. You put down two bowls of food,

happily thinking that each dog will tuck into their meals... and then they run back and forth between each other's bowls, scoffing at high speed, or one dog ends up eating everything while the other stands back. This is a dominance issue, and indicates that the hierarchy is unstable.

There's another aspect related to dominance, and that's learning. Have you given little Fluffy treats from the dinner table? Do you prepare food on the counter and hand down snacks? In a nutshell, don't do that. You're creating dominance! And also a dog that begs and thinks that it's okay to take your food. It's not okay. I have no problem with dogs getting human leftovers, but give it to them *on your terms*. I'll tell you what I do with my dogs. I eat first (because I'm the alpha). If there's something that I want to give them, I take them outside, away from the human eating arena, and ask them to sit before I give them each a titbit. If they ask for more, they are thoroughly ignored. If there are a lot of leftovers (sometimes I make extra rice just for this purpose) I keep it in the fridge and give it to them with their meal. In this way, my food is completely separated from their food and there's no confusion about who it belongs to.

So, don't give your dog snacks from the dinner table and then act surprised when you find them on the table licking out your plate. Little Fluffy then gets shouted at for something that you've encouraged and that is completely natural to them. You've made them think that your food belongs to them and that they're dominant in that area. Food is a powerful resource: Make sure that you control it.

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