

Teach Your Dog to Take Treats Gently

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If your dog bites down hard when you offer him a treat, you are not alone. This is a common complaint among people who come to me for dog training advice. Here are some suggestions to help your dog learn to be gentler when taking treats from your hand.

Set aside some time and some small treats to work on this lesson separately from other lessons. Once your dog has learned to take food nicely, you can start to incorporate this lesson in with other lessons. This ensures that you will take your time focusing only on this one lesson and not get distracted by trying to teach anything else during the lesson.

Begin with a treat that is rather bland and not too exciting. If you start with the super special exciting treats, your dog may be overexcited and even more likely to bite down hard. You can add the super special exciting stuff back into the lesson later on if you want. Only work on this exercise about 5-10 times per lesson. If you continue to work on it too long, your dog may become overexcited about the food and begin to be less gentle. Dogs tend to bite down harder as they get excited or stressed. You want to set your dog up for success by only doing a few successful repetitions, and then take a break.

Close your hand tightly around a treat to make a fist. The idea is that the dog cannot get the treat until you open your hand. Present your closed fist with the treat inside to your dog. He may sniff at the treat or lick your fist. If he does, use your marker signal (see The Magic Marker article) and open your hand to let him have the treat from your flat palm. Keeping your palm open and flat will keep your fingers back out of the way of your dog's teeth.

If, when you present the treat in your fist, your dog bites down on your hand, remove your hand without giving him the treat. Pause for a moment and then present your fist again. Use your marker signal to pinpoint any behaviors that are less intense than the previous attempt. So, if your dog bit down hard on your fist, mark the behavior of sniffing, licking, mouthing but not biting down on your skin, etc. Any behavior that is gentler than the last should be marked and rewarded with the treat from your open flat palm. This is called shaping. You are rewarding steps in your dog's behavior that get closer and closer to what you want the end result to be.

Once you can present a treat in your fist each time without your dog trying to bite, you can move on to the next step. Now hold the treat in your fist, but open your fist just a little bit so your dog can get the treat by licking, but not by biting. Your hand should be open in a small "O" shape, with the treat tucked inside. If your dog tries to bite, tighten your fist, so he cannot get the treat, and remove your hand. After a pause, try again. When your dog is licking or otherwise trying to get the treat without biting, mark and open your hand to allow him to eat the treat. You may also find that your dog is sitting and looking at you politely waiting for the treat. This is great too! Mark and reward!

Give your dog the chance to make the correct choice about how to get the treat. He will learn from his own behavior how to get the treat. When you remove your hand and he doesn't get the treat, he will learn that his behaviors of biting down hard don't work. When you mark and open your hand so he can get the treat, he will learn that being gentle does work.

Move toward actually offering your dog a treat in the normal fashion. Begin with your fingers curled in toward your hand as you hold the treat between your finger and thumb. This is similar to a fist but the treat will now be tightly between your thumb and index finger. When he is gentle, mark and softly release the food into his mouth.

Be ready! Do not ever let your dog have the treat if he snaps roughly or if his teeth hurt your hand! If he gets a treat when he is rough, he will have already gotten his reward (the treat) and won't see any reason to try to be gentle.

As he gets more reliable, you can begin to gradually open your hand until you can hand him a treat in your usual fashion. If he regresses, just go back and review the lessons. When you feel ready, you can begin to increase the quality of treats to those super special exciting ones! Begin with the first lessons of the treat in your fist, and you will find that you can work through the steps more quickly each time you review them.

Be sure when you are offering treats that you are not pulling your hand away. Often, when people are anticipating that their dog will bite their fingers, they will pull their hand back quickly when the dog starts to eat the treat. This may actually cause the dog to bite down harder on the treat (and your fingers) as he tries to grab it before you pull it away. Instead, hold your hand steady, or even push the food slightly into your dog's mouth.

Until your dog can reliably take treats from your hand nicely during these sessions, it is best to keep sessions for other behaviors (tricks, obedience, etc) separate. During training sessions for other behaviors, you can toss the treats onto the floor or into a dog dish to reward your dog until he learns to take food nicely. Or you can present the treat on your flat palm. This will save your fingers.

As he learns to control his mouth, start to incorporate the food lessons in with other lessons. Each time you offer a treat, wait until he is controlling his mouth before you release the food to him. Young children should always give treats with adult supervision! They should always give a treat from their flat palm, with their fingers laid flat. That way, no fingers will be next to the dog's teeth. Young children can also "serve" dogs treats from a small dish or cup that they hold. Again, no fingers near the dog's teeth!

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