



The yellow fish story – Blue is eating

Blue has a new present – a yellow toy fish that makes a squeaky noise! He is proud of this new toy and walks to the kitchen with it in his mouth. He then drops it and starts eating from his bowl. Simon approaches and sits down besides Blue. He strokes him gently on the back. Then suddenly... Oh dear... Blue turns towards Simon showing his teeth and threatening to bite, as if to say: “I don’t want to be stroked when I am eating”.

Why is Blue showing his teeth?

Blue sees Simon approach as he is eating his food, and does not understand Simon’s intentions. Blue thinks Simon might take away his food bowl, or even steal his brand new fish toy! So Blue shows his teeth to stop Simon.

How to prevent this situation?

Children – In real life, many accidents happen when children approach the family dog while he is eating. Therefore, make sure your children learn to leave the dog on his own when he is having his meal. It is important that the whole family is consistent with this rule.

Parents – In order to improve compliance with the rule ‘leave the dog alone when he is eating’, parents should give the right example themselves. In addition, they might encourage the child to participate in the dog’s feeding ritual (e.g. preparing the dog’s food together; placing the food bowl on the floor, and consistently leaving the dog on his own to eat in peace). In that way, the need to leave the dog alone when he is eating is stressed, even though this may not have appeared to be a problem in the past.

Dog – Dogs do not necessarily react defensively when approached while eating. Their reaction depends on learned attitudes and other factors like food quality, hunger and so on. Parents with small children should become familiar with their dog’s behaviour around his food bowl. Obedience exercises like “learn to earn”, rewarding the dog for being calm around food or teaching the dog to start eating on command might be helpful.

For some dogs, food is such an important resource that they do not want anyone approaching while eating. When defensive behaviour around food is present, each meal can lead to a potential risk situation and it is advised to get help from a behavioural counsellor.

How does your dog behave around his food? Does he become fearful or perhaps eat more quickly when you are around? Alternatively, does he take a defensive attitude when you approach the food bowl or when someone passes by? It is cause for concern if your dog shows signs of agitation or aggression (growling, biting, or snapping) while eating or while you are preparing food. You may need to contact your veterinarian or an animal behaviour counsellor for help.