

## Taking Candy from a Stranger?

Owners of fearful dogs will frequently ask strangers to offer treats to their dog, in order to get the dog “used to” strangers. But consider what this looks like from the dog’s point of view. The stranger’s hand is like a mouse trap with a bit of cheese in it. The dog is terrified of the person (the trap)... and yet she so badly wants that treat! It’s so hard to walk away, yet approaching to take the treat could mean walking into a trap that she can’t escape from. What a bind!

For a fearful dog, receiving treats from a stranger’s hand can create big and conflicting feelings. This is often exacerbated by well-intentioned strangers who accidentally add pressure to an already tense situation by staring at, reaching toward or patting the dog once they approach.

These attempts at friendship make sense to us as primates (reaching hands, grinning, eye contact), but are perceived as aggressive from our fearful dog’s canine point-of-view (reaching over, baring teeth, hard stare). Most dogs are very tolerant of our rude primate tendencies, but fearful or reactive dogs tend to lack that trust in strangers.

While it is true that some dogs can be quickly “won over” with a few treats, even they will benefit from a more gradual process. For a dog with persistent fear, and certainly a dog with reactive or aggressive tendencies, that approach can compound already complicated feelings about the scary stranger and the food they hold.

*The following information is not a complete training plan. There are many important details that simply cannot be included in a newsletter article. If you think your dog could benefit from training such as this, reach out to a qualified positive reinforcement-based behaviour consultant who can make an informed decision about exercises that will most benefit your dog.*

That said, and keeping the nuances of an individual case in mind, it can sometimes be helpful for a fearful dog to see that good things can actually come from a scary stranger. In this case, the stranger plays the role of “helper” to the owner. The dog won’t be encouraged to approach the helper to take food from their hand, and the helper needs to follow a strict set of rules to ensure that the dog doesn’t see the training set up as a trap.

## Pick Your Helper Carefully

It may seem counter intuitive, but the best helper will be someone who doesn't want to make friends with your dog! Someone who "just can't help themselves" when it comes to cooing at or patting dogs will be a less effective helper in this situation. While they may have loving intentions, these helpers introduce a lot of extra pressure on an already stressed dog.

This session is to meet your dog's needs, not another person's - the goal is not to "allow" the helper to touch the dog or to "win over" the dog. The measure of success will be in the dog's emotional shift for the better, not in how close a helper can get.

The best helper will be:

- Someone who is neutral in their posture and body language (do they tend to loom or stare? Or do they have a soft gaze and keep their weight shifted back? Do they tend to speak loudly and move suddenly, or do they tend to speak and move softly?)
- Is not excited to stare at, speak to, or pat your dog or make friends quickly
- Of a profile that is least triggering for your dog. For example, if a dog is extra afraid of men, do not start with a man as a helper.
- Is able to follow instructions well. This includes specifics such as not staring at the dog, keeping their body sideways, and being able to throw treats as described above.
- Someone who clearly understands what your goal is.

The stumbling block is that people often believe a dog's approach for food means they are also approaching to make friends. The best way to crush their new curiosity is to pressure them for more contact.

Instead of handing treats to the dog, the helper is instead going to toss treats **past** the dog, so the dog walks away to eat the treat from the ground. While it sounds simple, there are some important considerations to bear in mind.

## How to Toss Treats

Your helper will need to:

- Throw treats such that the treats land **behind** the dog. The treats will **never** lead the dog toward the helper. That will create a counter-productive pressure to approach and interact before the dog is comfortable enough to do so. This is a cornerstone to the success of this strategy.

- Orient their body sideways to the dog - not straight on. This is a less intimidating stance. It might even be helpful to have them sit in a chair, instead of standing.
- Throw the treats like a dart with a flick of the wrist, keeping their arm in line with their upper body. This prevents looming forward, and eliminates big arm movements that so many dogs find intimidating.
- Never point out a treat that the dog has missed - instead, the owner will point out treats that the dog can't find. Treats that land too close to the helper can either be ignored (if the dog hasn't noticed), or the helper can back away a few steps and the owner can point out the lost treat. The helper shouldn't lean, point at, or retrieve the treat. (These motions look to the dog as if the helper is moving in to touch them)
- Select a treat that is heavy enough to achieve these goals. Light treats will flutter and land unpredictably, treats that stick to fingers are hard to toss without a lot of arm movement, oddly shaped treats can ricochet back to the helper, and round treats will roll under furniture. In most cases, the treat should be the same as what the owner normally has in their pouch.
- The helper will need to be briefed and given a practise run on all of this **before** the dog is involved in the training session. Practising without the dog present means that you can pause and work out any kinks, without the dog becoming increasingly nervous as trainer and helper learn the routine.

### **Watch the Subtleties of Your Dog's Body Language**

It is often difficult to see the little hints of fear that can escalate into a reaction, particularly if a dog is eating. The following body language indicates that your dog is fearful and not benefitting from the training. If you see this, it could be a good time to take a break and reassess.

- Leaning forward to take a treat and leaving back legs trailing
- Taking a treat and backing away rapidly
- Jerky or twitchy movements
- Startling as the treat is thrown, or as she looks up from eating
- Clamped base of the tail, even if the rest of the tail isn't tucked
- Particularly slow or fast movements

### **Approaching for Food *Is Not the Same as* Approaching for Social Contact!**

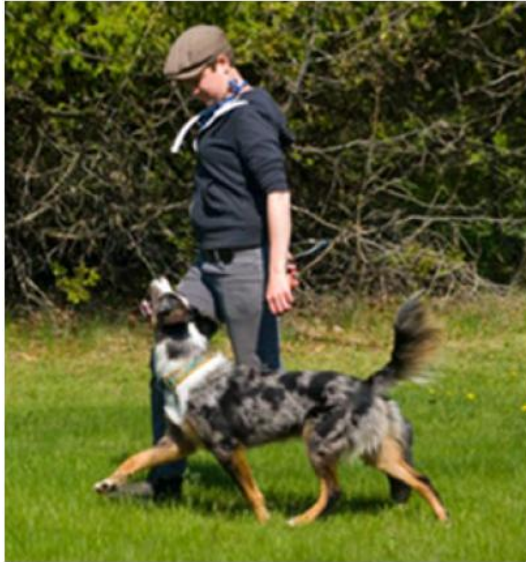
It is critical to understand that approaching a person for food is not the same as approaching a person for social contact. No matter how the food is delivered, getting

treats from strangers can create some draw toward that scary stranger. This approach is simultaneously a part of the goal, as well as a potential hazard.

Consider the goal to be about creating curiosity about the stranger, not overtly about closing distance. Rather than assuming only the worst of the person... perhaps there's the possibility that something good could happen! This can be the start of a big win for a dog who would otherwise avoid the person at all costs, or is ready to bark at the slightest provocation.

When working with a nervous dog, we need to strike a balance between cultivating gentle attention toward and curiosity about the "scary" stranger and disengaging from that person and, instead, seek support from the owner or environment. A dog will become increasingly attentive and drawn to a stranger who is feeding them, although tossing treats instead of giving treats by hand significantly tones down the problems associated with food coming from the stranger. To limit some of the draw toward the helper, it can be helpful to incorporate breaks within the session with food-stuffed toys, or other owner-focused exercises. It is your job to help your dog find a balance between this new curiosity, and being able to disengage.

Having a qualified, positive reinforcement-based behaviour consultant on board from the start will help you avoid or properly navigate the nuances in this training strategy. Taking the next step into making physical contact, and true social interaction, needs to be navigated carefully. How this happens will depend very much on the nature of your dog's anxiety, any risks they may pose to a helper once they are near enough to potentially make contact, and a careful and educated observation of your dog's response throughout the process to determine when and if they are already for a next step.



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