

Keep The Food Bowl! Why Dogs Don't Need 100% Hand Feeding

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Dog training, like everything, is filled with fads and it seems there's a fad upon us that I think could get people into trouble. And I'd like to talk about that today. And that is everybody telling you to not feed your dog from a bowl. Yeah, I'm going to be that girl. Let's go.

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And I'm not going to say every meal your dog gets should come from a bowl, but I am going to say, it's never a bad thing that at least part of your dog's meal comes from a bowl.

And I think it's a really, really good thing to do as well. So, let's jump into some of the ways you might be feeding your dog and why I could be contradicting myself on this one when I tell you, "Feed from a bowl."

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So, you could feed your dog with food puzzles, or a Toppl, or maybe rolling food up in a towel, puppy bombs, you could feed them by scattering food in the yard. So, all of those things get the dog to use their nose, their mouth, and their body when they're eating, which that isn't a bad thing. I'm on board for that.

It does take some planning on your part, but even then, I still think the dog should learn to eat from a bowl as well. So, I'm not saying those things are bad, I love those things, but there's other ways to feed your dog.

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You might feed your dog - some people like to use a charcuterie board where you give your dog a selection of different foods, I think that is amazing for senior dogs or dogs who are you know, maybe their stomach doesn't feel great, and they might want to choose this thing over the other one day or another. I've done that with my older dogs.

Lick mats. Tater Salad gets the vast majority of his food from a lick mat now, brachiocephalic, it's easier for him. It takes him 30 minutes to eat his meal from a lick mat, which it used to take him less than 30 seconds to eat his meal and then he just licked the furniture. So, lick mats, I love those.

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And the number one thing that everybody is trying to get you to do is to feed all of your dog's meals from your hand. Now, I'm a dog trainer. I'm a [reinforcement-based dog trainer](#), and I'm telling you not to do that. You're going to say, "Remember Susan, you wrote that book *Ruff Love*. And you told us in that book [Ruff Love](#) that all the meals should come from our hands."

Oh, I got a couple of things to say. Number one, I wrote this book back in 2000 and 2001. It was published I think in 2002. So, a lot of things have changed in my life in the last 21 years. Number two, [the book was written](#) specifically for dogs that were having a relationship problem with their people. And so, it was meant for a period of time to feed your dog all of their meals from your hands.



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Now, I'm not saying dogs shouldn't be fed from your hands. I think it's great. For me I feed raw, so it's a little icky. I do use a spoon, it's an art, I can share with you if you like. But I believe dogs should not be kept from their primary reinforcer because they have to earn it. I believe that dogs need that comfort and the security to know, "You're getting food from me. You don't have to be a good dog to get that."

That's the commitment I made when I said, "Welcome to the family." So, it isn't dependent upon you doing anything the right way. And that's what's getting me a little upset is that people are saying, "Throw away the bowl. We're only going to feed your dog from your hand now." Yeah, no. No.

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Now again, I said I love all of those interactive ways that involve other parts of the dog when they're getting their meals through like an educational game or you know, rolling out a mat or something like that. But I believe dogs need to learn to eat from a bowl. Whenever a dog is taking food on board, they may be learning something like in the educational game, but they're definitely being conditioned to something.

So, they're being conditioned to loving your hands, which is why in *Ruff Love* I wanted people to feed their dogs from their hands. And so, you've got to be aware. We want our dogs also to be conditioned to eat from a bowl.

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It's so important. Because there may be times when your dog is staying at a hospital. Maybe they need to eat their meals from a bowl there, or they're being boarded or they're [staying with a friend](#) that they can't go to all the extensive things that you do. Or when they get older, or maybe you're just busy one day and you just have to feed your dog because you're going on a camping trip, for a big adventure. You've got to feed your dog from the bowl.

If the dog's been conditioned that all of their meals come from a Toppl or a rolled-up towel, or your hands as you train them, they may not eat from a bowl. Trust me, I've seen it happen. And so, I've always taken a portion of my puppy's food and let them eat it from a bowl.

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I want them to be happy to eat food from a bowl. And I also see this only hand feed dogs go very, very badly. So, I've seen one puppy that came in for a private lesson and the puppy was frantic, like anxious about food, and I was getting bit really hard when I tried to give the puppy food. And I think it was about 11 o'clock in the morning and I said, "When was this puppy last fed?" And she said, "Well, last night when I trained."

And I'm like, "Puppies need eating." And this puppy was getting so anxious, which is another thing I've seen when dogs are only hand fed, they get this anxiety. Some even get like [a little bit guardy](#), whether that's because the food only comes when the person decides you're good enough.

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But there is definitely some anxiety when the dog has to be 'good enough' to get your food. And I just don't think that's right. You know, we love our dogs. They should know 'you're going to get fed.' And "You know what at 11 o'clock we're going to go and we're going to do some learning, and that's going to be great. You're going to get fed some more."



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But I think the biggest problem is that people who are telling you to get rid of your dog's bowl, they don't want to go to the depth of education to share with you all the other ways to train a dog without using food. And I think that's the missing link here, because [reinforcement is everywhere in your dog's life](#).

Yes, reinforcement is in the form of food. And I'm not saying don't train with your dog's meals, I'm saying train with your dog's meals once the dog has had some food, so they're not so anxious about getting that food from you. So that they know a portion of their food will always come in a bowl. And someday when you've got to make that more than a little portion, it's easy for you.

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In the meantime, look at other ways that you can train your dog. We can train [using reinforcement](#) of activities. So, you like to go for a car ride, then I'm going to strategically plan you've done like the best hand target ever just before, "I was going to take you for a car ride to go get ice cream anyway." [We're not buying ice cream for our dogs, come on.]

Or you know the dog loves to go for a swim. You know you're going to the park for a swim, so you might be working on you know, hold position. They get you a great hold position, you can reward with a toy, and then you're going to run out and go for a swim.

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There's so many other things you could be doing. I do reinforce my dogs with food, but I reinforce my dogs with interactive games with me, my dogs love to chase. The game of tug, a great game for rewarding a dog. Activities that your dog loves. Throwing a ball, throwing a frisbee, whatever it is, keep it handy to whatever behavior you're working on.

And the ultimate reward is, 'Yeah, let's go do something! Let's go toss around the football.' Alright, maybe the dog might be not great at catching it, but you get what I mean. So, activities the dog loves. Keep them in mind like, "Oh my gosh, my dog gets so happy when—" [Use that as a reinforcement](#).

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Like you know, your dog goes gaga when your mother comes over, your dog just adores your mother, then make sure that you're working on something. And tell your mom, "Pop over at nine o'clock," and your mom's going to be opening the door and you're going to go "go see!" Ultimate reward, boom! Nothing is better. The dog is like, "Ooh! It's grandma!" So yes, food is a great resource to use in your training, but so are activities, so are toys.

Your dog likes squeakies, your dog likes toys that make weird noises when they roll along the ground. Whatever it is that your dog loves, that is a great reinforcement. But what happens too often, people know, "My dog loves it when I kick the soccer ball to him." So then go out, put the soccer ball in the backyard and do some [loose leash walking](#).

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You get two steps of loose leash walking, and then you say, "Soccer ball!" And you run over to where it's standing in its enshrinement waiting for you to go over. Okay, maybe it's just sitting in the grass, and you kick it for your dog. You might kick it a couple of times.

"Alright, let's go back and do some loose leash walking." And guess what, your dog's going to love loose leash walking because it potentially leads to the soccer ball. Alright, use your imagination guys.



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Bottom line is: dogs should not have to earn the right to get fed from you one or two or three times a day, depending on the schedule of your dog. But yes, feeding your dog from your hand is a great way to build a bond with you.

It's a great way to reinforce things that need to be reinforced over and over and over again. Like the position of be at your side when they're walking on a leash. Yeah, I love walking with a bait bag somewhere on my body or cookies in my pouch of my jacket. I love doing that.

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There's little depots around my house everywhere where there's treats, but it isn't a measured amount of food for the dog, it's just extras. Now you've got to keep an eye on your dog's weight. We weigh our dogs once a week, so we know what everybody weighs and we know, "Oh okay, we've got to cut back on the number of treats." That's never a problem.

We give them enough exercise; extra treats are never going to be a problem. So yes, I love hand feeding, but I don't love the fad of everybody telling you, "Do not feed your dog from a bowl." They need the conditioning of learning to love to eat out of a bowl, because there will come a day when you are going to be sorry that your dog won't eat out of a bowl because somebody told you not to feed them from one.

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Okay so that's my take on this latest crazy fad. I think that there's so many other ways that you can reinforce your dog but withholding food isn't going to be one of them for me. And yes, use your reinforcement in the smartest way you can. Yes, use food from your hand to reinforce, but also think of all the other things in your life that your dog finds joy in and use those things to reinforce as well.

I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog. [Yeah, like hearts for some dogs are a reinforcement, right Swaggy?]

Resources:

[YouTube Playlist: Reinforcement, Permissions and Transfer of Value in Dog Training with Susan Garrett](#)

[Book: Ruff Love by Susan Garrett](#)

[Vlog: Talking About Ruff Love \(Tater and Chipmunks\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 216: Dog Sitting For A Friend? Top 10 Tips For Fun, Safety And Success](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Resource Guarding In Dogs and Puppies with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 196: Why Mastering Reinforcement Is The Linchpin To Reinforcement Based Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 94: How the Best Professional Dog Trainers Use Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 205: The Hidden World Of Reinforcement For Dogs And Why You Need To Know](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Loose Leash Walking with Susan Garrett](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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