

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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SG If I told you there was one difference between very successful dog trainers and most pet owners, and that one major difference was responsible not only for a better relationship between the person and their dog but was responsible for the dog being easier to train and was also responsible for the dog living a long life and having less health problems. You'd be more interested in knowing what that one difference was, right? Yeah, I thought so.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And today, I'm going to tell you right off the bat that one difference that will [help your dog live a longer healthier life](#), that will help you have a better relationship and make that dog easier to train it's something that is achievable by every single person who owns a dog. And it is all to do with how you feed your dog. Simple right? That's the difference. It's how you feed your dog because there's really two groups of people.

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There are people who put the dog food in a bowl, put the bowl down for the dog. And when the dog has finished a few minutes later, they pick that dog bowl up, and that's it until the next meal. And then there's people who fill a dog food bowl and put it down and leave it down for the day. And when it comes around to the next day or maybe a couple of days later, they might top up that dog food.

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That kind of person, the person who leaves the food down, that's called free choice feeding or free feeding. Sometimes it's called graze feeding the dog, allowing the dog to graze throughout the day. Now some of you might feed your dog two meals a day, but if the dog doesn't eat at all and they walk away, you leave it there for them. Same thing, slightly different version, but you're still allowing the dog to graze.

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And that is hugely problematic, as I alluded to at the very beginning of this podcast. And by the way, if you're watching this podcast on YouTube go ahead and click the like button for me, will you? Let me know that this is a topic that's of interest to you. So why is free choice feeding such a huge problem?

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Well, there's a lot of obvious and a lot of not-so-obvious reasons. First of all, if you have a puppy and you free choice feed your puppy, they learn a lot of bad habits. Number one with a puppy is the impulse to have to relieve themselves happens soon after eating. You have no idea when that urge is going to happen if you free choice feed your puppy, and so it's going to make [house training](#) a lot harder.



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There's going to be a lot more accidents in places you don't want them to if that food is left down all the time. But when you know, predictably, you've put down a meal, the puppies eaten. When the puppy backs away from that food if there's any left, you pick it up, and then you're going to take that puppy outside for a walk because you know when they've had that meal.

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So, for sure, if you have a puppy, I mean, let's face it, if you want your dog to live a long life with less health issues, that alone should make us all say, "Okay, all right. I'll never put food down and leave it down." That's a biggie. But for puppies, it's just super important because you're teaching a puppy to be a picky eater by leaving the food down all the time. Because "You know what? I don't really have to eat now. It'll be there whenever I want it. And if I want it now, fine. If I don't want it, fine".

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But what about the health of other dogs? There has been studies done on this, like this one by a list of people, and it was published in the journal of veterinary medicine. I'll leave a link to that in the show notes.

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And they looked at 48 eight-week-old Labrador puppies, and they split them into two groups; half they gave free choice feeding the same brand of dog food, and the other half were given the opportunity to eat just two meals a day of the same brand of dog food. And then, at two years of age, they looked at these dogs' hip x-rays.

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Now the group that were given access to free-feeding, [18 of those 24 puppies by the age of two had hip dysplasia](#), which meant they are going to have a limited life. They are varying depending on the degree and the severity of the hip dysplasia; they are going to develop arthritis. They may have arthritis changes at the age of two. That means that they're going to have some sort of pain element to their life, which means their mobility is going to be less.

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And it's preventable because, in the other group, only five of the 24 dogs in the other group were dysplastic. Of course, hip dysplasia is dependent upon genetics as well, but definitely allowing the dogs to free choice feed, graze feed has a huge impact on that.

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Now, what other health impact that has, is dogs who are allowed to pick their own food when they want it all day long, they have more obesity. 40% of dogs in the general population are obese. Not just fat, they are obese. And a big part of that is they're being fed too much food because food today is so high in calories, and a lot of dogs today live a pretty sedentary life, and one plus one equals big fat dogs.

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Obese dogs don't live as long as fit dogs. The same is true for us people. You want to keep a dog as fit and healthy as possible. You want to keep them at an ideal weight. You do not want your dog carrying extra weight because it not only leads to a shortened life but to a lot more health problems during that shortened life.



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So, we know that it can cause health problems. We know that it can lead to obesity, and it definitely is going to impact the quality of that dog's life.

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In addition, by not putting down a bowl of food twice a day, you're missing a great training opportunity with the dog. Because when you are free choice, feeding that bowl of food isn't looked upon with the same excitement. Why should it be? It's there all the time. All you're doing is topping it up.

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When you want to train your dog with food, they might be engaged with you for a little bit, but if it gets a little bit, "Oh, this is not interesting to me, I'm going to walk away because I really don't care about your food." It makes training so darn difficult. "Food is plentiful in my world. It's everywhere. It's not really that important." Imagine if you had the opportunity to eat the same food and it was plentiful, and you could get it every hour of the day. It would eventually become not that important, and the same is true for dogs who get access to free choice feed.

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Plus, the fact that when you would go to train that dog, even if you could get them interested in the food, they're probably either partially or fully full. So, they couldn't physically eat more food. Now the other side of that coin is dogs who are not free choice fed, who are given a bowl of food in the morning and another bowl of food at night, they are going to be more keen to train and work with you.

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You can use those two opportunities when the food is coming. It's more exciting to that dog because they haven't seen a bowl of food in 8 to 10 hours. When you go to put it down, you can ask them for a simple behavior. Like my dogs, it's hang out in the crate, and I don't want your paws touching the floor (is my puppy's criteria).

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And when you do that, I will deliver food to you. And if you don't do that, then we will wait until your paws go in the crate. It's a great opportunity to train your dog a behavior that you're working on. Hold a sit while I put the bowl down, don't dive in. You're teaching the dog that when I ask you to do something, and you do it, then I will give you what you want, which is your big bowl of food.

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So, the other thing that maybe isn't so obvious about this scenario is you are the one delivering the food. Now, when you pour it, and it's always there, it's the floor that magically erupted this food. It has nothing to do with you. So when you're delivering it, and you're asking for a behavior, the value of the food goes through you, and it deepens the relationship you have with your dog, as does all that extra training that you get to do with your puppy or dog.



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And so, when you are free choice feeding, you're losing a lot of opportunities. It's a common question that we get in our online classrooms is that "You know, my dogs don't seem to be as keen as your dogs are in the video." And the first question that I or one of the members of my team is going to ask you is, "please describe your feeding routine with your dog." And most of the time, it's predictable that "Well, my dog is a picky eater" (probably because it's been allowed to be), "so I just leave the food down all day." We can fix this, and I will get to that later but let's keep addressing why we don't want to free choice feed.

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A lot of times, when people put food in a bowl, they just tend to top it up. And so, some of the food may have gone rancid, or it may have attracted insects into the bowl. So, it's a health risk when you're leaving food out all day. Now I hope if you are one of those people that you aren't leaving out wet food because that can go bad much, much faster than kibble. But if you're leaving out just dry kibble, then you've got to be sure that the dog's drinking enough water to balance that dry, dehydrated kibble.

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Another reason why it's not good for your dog's health if you free choice feed is because when I put my dogs' breakfast down if they leave some and walk away, I have a heads up that they might not be feeling well. And then I'll put down their dinner at night, and if they have a pattern of suddenly not eating in the morning but they're eating more at night, then I can go to my Veterinarian and say, "Here's what I've seen."

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You don't have that opportunity if the food's there all the time. The other thing you don't have the opportunity is to plan for some fun exercise. So, if I'm going to let my dogs go for a big swim, then I know it's not going to be right after they've eaten. But if you don't know when that is, you can't plan for that intense exercise with your dog.

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Another problem that you might be seeing if you're free choice feeding is when I put down a meal for my dog, and they eat it, and then for my dogs, it's 12 hours in between post meals. When I put down another one, I've given their stomach time to empty.

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So the food in a dog's stomach usually takes 8 to 10 hours to digest. And so, it goes into the small intestine, and it triggers a hunger response. You are never triggering a hunger response when the food is always there—again, leading to more picky eaters and leading to a dog who has less interest in training.

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If you are a person like me who wants to use [reinforcement](#) in my training, you have eliminated the possibility of using food reinforcement, and you've got to get more clever on how you can do things. Like only use toys or activities to train your dog. It doesn't have to be that way.



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Now, if you are saying, “Susan, okay, I want to change.” I’m going to flip this around. I’m going to give you a plan that you can do. Number one, you’re going to decide how much food that dog really needs. Are they too thin? Are they too heavy? Let’s get them into a good weight.

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And if you aren’t sure what that good weight is, take a look at other dogs, look online, or look around and ask how much does your dog weigh. So, if you have a Border Collie and your Border Collie is 20 inches tall and weighs 50 or 60 pounds, or more, then I’ve got to tell you, very likely it’s overweight, and it may possibly be obese.

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Now I’m not saying there aren’t Border Collies out there that are 50 or 60 pounds, but chances are very slim. For example, the heaviest Border Collie in my household is Swagger, and he’s 42 pounds. And he’s 21 inches at the shoulder, and he’s got a lot of muscle on him. My young puppy This! only weighs 30 pounds.

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Take a look online, ask around, “what’s your dog weigh?” come to YouTube and put it in the comments. And I bet there’ll be people that will say, “Well, I have a friend, and their dogs really fit, and it’s that breed, and it weighs this.” Now again, it doesn’t mean that is your dog, but you can go to your Veterinarian and say, “Look, I really want my dog to be lean cause I know lean dogs live a lot longer. Can you let me know what you think?”

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So, we’ve got a goal. You’re going to weigh your dog at least once a month. But if you want your dogs to either gain or lose weight, you should be weighing them every week. I personally like to feed my dogs in a stainless-steel bowl. I think that’s far more sanitary.

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I’m going to give a link in the show notes to [the bowls that I love](#) and how you can get bowls just like them. But those bowls have to be washed at least once a day. My dogs’ bowls get washed after every meal. And once a week, they get put into the dishwasher for sanitizing. Now we hand wash with hot soapy water.

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Both your dog’s food bowl and their water bowl need to be washed regularly. If you have a picky eater, I’m going to give you ideas on how you can change that. But if you listened to [episode 70](#) of Shaped by Dog, where I was talking about your puppy’s first day and night, you would have learned that I like to feed 75% of my meals in the form of training. Which means they’ll be hand-fed to the dog, and we’ll be playing training games.

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If you are in [one of my classes](#) like Recallers or Home School the Dog or any of our Agility programs, then of course, you’ve got a whole slew of games that you can play with your dog. If you aren’t in any of my programs, but you’re interested in playing one of our training games, I’m going to give you a link in the show notes on how you can get access to some of those games right here on YouTube.



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I've got a bunch of them, both for puppies, and any games that I have there for puppies can be used on any age of dog. Just check out the games I have here on YouTube. They may be listed as [puppy games](#), but they can be effectively used for any age dog.

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75% of those meals go into [training games](#), and 25% just go to the experience of "here's your food, eat your meal out of the bowl." So, they get the experience of eating out of the bowl. You don't have to be hand feeding them all their meals. Now, if you're super busy in the morning, you can go to 50% of the meal in the bowl, and 50% hand fed and then do 100% of that meal, training games at night.

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All right, let's talk picky eaters. If you've got a really picky eater, here's what I'd like you to do. I'd like you to stop giving them a chance to walk away from a full bowl of food. Stop letting them say, "I don't want that food," and then you putting some of your human table scraps on top. What you're going to do is, you're going to put down just a spoonful of dog food in that bowl and put it down.

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If the dog sniffs it and walks away, then take it up until the next mealtime. Now I feed my dogs somewhere between 8 and 10 in the mornings, and on weekends I feed them at 5:30 in the morning, and then they get fed somewhere around 5 or 5:30 in the afternoon. So, if I had a picky eater, I would give them that small meal, and if they walked away, I would give them the next one the next time around.

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I would then maybe change out that food and try a different food for the next meal when I get them to eat. So, let's say they eat at eight o'clock in the morning. I would offer them another small meal at noon and then another small meal at five, and then another small meal before bedtime.

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And then I'm just getting them the rehearsal of finishing a small meal. Now, if you have a dog that loves going for a car ride or going outside, you [throw the ball or play a game of tug](#). When you give them a small meal, and they eat it say, "let's go do X," and that X is whatever that dog really loves.

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And in that way, we're helping to build value for when you finish your bowl; we get to do something you really love. Now you don't have to do this for the rest of their life. But we are conditioning the dog to finish their bowl. And it is possible to turn that picky eater into a dog who really loves their food.

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Don't be afraid to let that dog miss a meal. Some dogs can maybe even miss two meals. Now, this is also dependent on the breed. If you have a breed that is prone to bloat, definitely check with your Veterinarian about your plan. "Susan Garrett says I should let my dog miss a meal," and they might say, "Well, that's not good for that breed."



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So, I want to caution you to check with your Veterinarian before you decide that your dog's going to skip a meal. But most dogs will skip a meal without a problem. And they might even skip two meals without a problem. And then the next time you put down food, they're not going to say, "Oh, food is everywhere. Food is plentiful. It's not that important to me".

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They're going to go, "Uh, food is limited and valuable. People are awesome because they bring me food. I kind of like food." We're going to grow that intensity for food, which is going to help you be able to train your dog using the food. And that is the sweet spot we're looking for.

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So go from a free feeder, and yes, I recognize free feeding is easy for you. I dump a big pile of kibble on a bowl, and I walk away, and I come back, and I check it every couple of days. I hope after today's podcast you're convinced you are no longer a free feeder, and your dog is going to turn into a dog who looks forward to mealtimes because it's a bonding event for the two of you. I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 62: 12 Keys to Helping My Dogs Live a Long and Happy Life](#)

[Podcast Episode 48: Potty Train Your Puppy in a Week \(Easy 3 Step Process\)](#)

[\(PDF - Kealy RD, Olsson SE, Monti KL, et al.\) Effects of limited food consumption on the incidence of hip dysplasia in growing dogs](#)

[Podcast Episode 2: Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 70: Critical Info for Your Puppy's First Day and Night at Home](#)

[DogsThat Online Dog Training Programs](#)

[Video Blog: 5 Games for Puppies](#)

[Podcast Episode 32: 20 Easy Ways to Exercise Your Dog at Home](#)

[Podcast Episode 68: 3 Easy Tricks Every Dog Should Know](#)

[Basis Stainless Steel Pet Dog Bowls](#)



# Avoid This Big Mistake When Feeding Your Dog

### 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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