

Why Do Some Dogs Seem to Have Less Food Drive Than Others – 10 Reasons to Consider

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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At the time of recording this podcast episode, there are 650 videos on [our YouTube channel](#), and most of them have graphic demonstration on how to train your dog or puppy so much better. And every once in a while, on one of those videos comes up this question, “But how can I train my dog if they're not interested in food?” And today we begin to answer that question for you.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I say we begin to answer the question because it's going to take more than one podcast episode to answer that question. It's a pretty complex subject, and there might be multiple reasons combining which is causing your dog not to be interested in food.

So, we're going to begin today with the top 10 reasons that I can come up with why your dog may have very low food drive. And if you correct the ones that you go, “Oh, that could be my dog.”, that alone is going to make a massive impact on [your dog's drive for food](#) AKA your ability to train your dog.

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Because training in the way that we promote is about a [transfer of value](#). What the dog loves and wants gets put into the behavior we're trying to train the dog to do. But if you don't have anything your dog loves or wants, then training gets really problematic.

So, let's solve that problem, okay? We're going to start with what I see is— well, let's do this in reverse order. The number 10 reason could be your puppy is a singleton. Now I know that is a rarity, but by saying your [puppy is a singleton](#), it means it didn't have any litter mates.

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Therefore, it didn't have to fight for food. Therefore, it got anything it wanted when it wanted. And so, there was no anxiety associated with mealtime, which meant that puppy could eat until they were full. And so, there was no reason to be anxious about food.

And so, a lot of singleton puppies just don't have great food drive. Now, I'm going to preface this by saying I have a singleton puppy, Swagger, and he had very poor food drive as a puppy. But there's nature and there's nurture and everything is dog training.

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And as my mentor Bob Bailey says, all that we need to do is describe what we have as our problem, describe what we would like as the solution, in the middle, the gap between what we have and what we want is the dog training we have to do. Nature, nurture. So, if you have a singleton, don't just throw up your arms and go, “Oh Susan Garrett says my dog doesn't have food drive because he's a singleton. So, that's the way it is.” No, we can change it.

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Okay, number nine reason why your dog might not be as keen for food as you'd like is that dog may have anxiety or fear. Now think of yourself when you're terrified of something. It's highly unlikely that you want to eat at that moment.



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Now, when the anxiety comes down a little bit, you might reach for chocolate, but when you truly are afraid, you're not going to want to eat anything. So, dogs who have high anxiety or high fear, one of the worst things you could do with that dog is try to take them to an in person class and have them learn in that environment because it's the last place they're likely going to want to take food.

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So, we want to develop that dog's food drive at home, the place they are most comfortable. Develop a food drive there and when we can get it to a place where they are keen to play with you when you have food, then you can take your show on the road, but not until then.

Because when there's an emotional trigger in our brain, we can't be in our thoughtful brain. Related to that, there's another emotional trigger in that the dog might be highly stimulated or highly aroused, or potentially the environment is overwhelming. My Border Collies will often get, especially as puppies will get into that state.

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So, my puppy Prophet does not want to take food if he can see the other Border Collies running. "No, I just want to chase, just want to chase, just want to chase." It's impossible. Now, Tater Salad, I don't think there would be a time he wouldn't want food, but possibly if he saw a rabbit and I was offering him a boring treat, he might say, "No, I don't, I am not interested in that treat."

If it was a super high value, he is so food driven, he might, but with my Border Collies, when they are doing work like agility or something they love, almost every single one of them will go through a period as an adolescent where they say, "Nope, can't take food, just want to do agility."

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Nature, nurture, they're over a stimulated, they're overwhelmed. We just need to get them into a place where they will take that food, which means you get them out of that environment. So, if you're in the midst of agility all around you and they can't take food there, get them off the field, put them in your car.

"Can you take a cookie now?" "Yes, I can." "Now let's go back to play." You can overcome those dogs that are highly aroused, that are overwhelmed by excitement. And you can get them so that when they are in that place, they will take food.

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And we need to get them there because if you go back to [podcast episode 191](#) and you work on the relaxation protocol at home, and then you take that relaxation protocol on the road, you will get to a place where your dogs can relax. But it all starts with food.

Reason number seven, you may have a dog like my dog This!, who I described in [podcast episodes number 203 and 204](#). And This!y had a GI problem. And it wasn't obvious to me. She didn't vomit. She didn't have diarrhea. She just was getting too much protein for her body to handle. And it caused a problem with her brain functioning. So, it could just be as simple as that.

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This!y now loves food treats, but early on, she was okay with high value treats. But any kind of environmental stimulus could turn her off and she wouldn't eat food. So, it could be a physical problem that your dog has.



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So, I say GI, but it could be pain anywhere in that dog's body, pain or discomfort anywhere in their body. Heck, I know of one of my students who their dog had some boils in their mouth because of a food allergy and they weren't keen on food.

Another one of my students, their dog had a horrible overbite. And so, what they didn't know is the bottom teeth were hitting the inside of the roof of the mouth and they had all these pus filled, sorry for the graphic description, sores in their mouth.

No, they weren't keen on food. They weren't keen on anything. They were in pain. They were feeling uncomfortable. So, something physically wrong with the dog, that could be a big reason why they're refusing food.

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Reason number six, food hygiene. Yay. This is a biggie. You may actually be contributing to your dog not feeding well if the food hygiene isn't where it should be. Meaning, are you buying one of those monster bags of kibble to save money?

Do you know that that kibble goes rancid super, super fast? And so, you might be feeding your dog rancid food. Buy the smallest bag that your dog will go through in the next couple of weeks. And then just buy another one. Or buy a big bag if you want to but freeze it. Or better yet, [move to raw](#).

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Also, in line with the hygiene is, are you making sure your dog's bowls get thoroughly cleaned after every meal? So, we wash our dog's bowls with hot, steamy, soapy water and every night all the bowls go in the dishwasher. So that could be contributing to your dog not feeling their best.

Reason number five, too little activity. So, few dogs get [regular exercise](#) every single day.

I mean, out for a very brisk walk, an opportunity to do some sort of physical activity, a game of tug, a game of retrieve, a game of you know, walking, doing some canine parkour, anything to get the dog's heartbeat going.

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Because don't you feel a little more hungry after you've had a real active day. Well, if you want to increase your dog's food drive, how about you start by getting them off the couch and getting regular physical activity every single day.

Reason number four, the value of your treats. Number one, you might've started off with high value rewards, but you're using the same ones you've always used. Variety is your friend. So, you want different value food rewards, but you want to mix up what the highest is.

It could be roast beef. It could be roast chicken. It could be liver pate. You want to mix it up. Freeze dried sardines. Find out what your dog goes gaga for and then mix that up. So, they only get it once in a while.

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Don't go, "Oh, this is what he loves best." And then give it to him until he's like, "Oh, I don't really like it anymore." I don't think that could happen with me with chocolate, but I wouldn't mind having a try. I digress.



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Reason number three, how you're presenting the treats will have a massive impact. So, if you're just going like, "Do you want this or not?" If the dog has really good food drive, they're going to go, "Yeah, of course I do." But if they're just, "Ah no, I can do without.", then they're not really going to be interested in it.

So, you could do things like toss the treat in the corner or get them to chase you. And then they can eat the cookie off your hand, get more exciting when you deliver the food. So, not only use higher value food, but be more exciting in the delivery of the food to the dog.

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Reason number two, why your dog may not be interested in food. And this is a biggie. Overfeeding. Ugh. It could be your dog's overfed because you [free choice feed](#), meaning you put a bowl of food down there and you leave it there.

Maybe you add, you top it up every day or you change it out every couple of days, but there's always food for the dog in the bowl. And so, they're like, "Yeah. It's there. I want it. I'll take it." If you feed your dog one or two meals a day, our dogs get one meal a day where you put down the bowl and then you pick it up after five minutes.

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Now, if they're still eating, you know, don't pull it away from them. But as soon as they walk away, it's done. Yeah, party's over. Come back here when the restaurant is open again. Don't leave the food down because trust me, it's not going to encourage your dog to have more food drive. It's going to go in the opposite direction.

Second cousin to that is too many treats between meals. Now, it might not be just you. It might be like family members. Do you realize that the average sedentary dog only needs 20 calories per pound of body weight.

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So, if you have a little five-pound lap dog, they need like a hundred calories a day. I remember going through the donut shop drive through to get a tea and they would always say, "Hey, can we give your dog a donut hole?" Do you know that a donut hole is 80 calories? If your dog should only have a hundred calories a day, instantly they're being overfed. So, too big a meal or free choice meals or too many treats between meals, check every family member.

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If everyone just says, "Oh, I just give him one little treat." It adds up my friend. That could be why your dog really doesn't have much drive to work for food when you want to train them. Now check with your veterinarian on this one. One thing that I would like you to try is say, we're going to try a 12 hour fast with a dog. So, for 12 hours, there'll be no snacks, no food. Then try and do some training. Is your dog interested in the food training then?

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If not, like you've changed everything else, you've got your high value food, you're taking your dog for exercise, now you're trying that 12 hour fast. If that doesn't work, try a 24 hour fast. Again, consult your veterinarian if you're concerned.



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Some breeds, big dogs in particular, maybe shouldn't go 24 hours without food. 24-hour fast and see if that changes with all the other changes I've suggested. See if that changes your dog's drive for food. But overfeeding, inappropriate feeding between meals, that could be the reason your dog doesn't have a lot of food drive for training.

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And the number one reason I believe that many dogs do not have a high drive for food is that food refusal has become a reinforced behavior for the dog. What do I mean by that? Your dog says, "I don't really want Cheerios." You go, "Oh, okay. Well, I, I've got some— Oh, I got Oats & O's. How about Oats & O's?" No, Oats & O's is the same as Cheerios.

"Okay. Well, I got, I got some roast beef. I got some roast beef." "See, now you're talking. I want the roast beef. Why didn't you offer me roast beef?" "Okay. Okay. I'll be better next time." So, your dog said, "I don't want that." And you said, "Oh, okay. I will give you something very valuable for saying, I don't want that."

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So, what do you do if your dog says, "I don't want that."? What you can do is just take the dog out of your training spot, move them to a different spot, present it in a different way, see if that makes a difference. But what you don't want to do is say, "I will go to a different source."

If you put down a bowl of food and your dog says, "Yeah, I don't want that today." Then you don't go, "Oh, I'll run out and get a new brand of dog food. Let's try this one." I'm not saying that your dogs don't have the right to have preferences. For example, Kim's dog Belief does not like potatoes. And the funny thing is, Tater Salad got his name, Kim named him because she loves potatoes.

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So, we feed our dogs raw, they get chunks of fresh steamed vegetables, and Belief will always leave her potatoes. So, we just mash them up and mix them up with other things. Nope, that's not a big deal. She doesn't say, "I don't want potatoes." and then we take out the plate of potatoes and say, "Oh, well, how about broccoli?" Actually, she does love broccoli.

So, you have to be very careful and think about the times when your dog said, "Yeah, I don't really want that." and you have reinforced their choice of saying 'I don't want that' by giving them something different AKA different is so often better.

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There you have it. The top 10 reasons that I believe so many dogs end up with very low food drive. But the good news is, it's just a dog training problem. I know for many of you, if you just check yourself on these 10 reasons and make some adjustments, you will notice an increase in your dog's drive for food.

But the good news is in an upcoming episode, I'm going to carry on with this topic and give you some games you can play that will increase your dog's food drive.

But before I go, please jump over to YouTube and leave me a comment. If you can think of any other things I may have missed out, why you believe some dogs just don't have drive for food. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.





Episode: #269

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Resources:

[DogsThat YouTube Channel](#)

[Podcast Episode 179: Help For Dogs Refusing Treats: Case Study With Training Plan](#)

[Podcast Episode 90: Premack, Dog Training and Transfer of Value](#)

[Podcast Episode 218: Puppy Development Stages And Your Dog's Behavior](#)

[Podcast Episode 191: Get Your Dog To Calm Down With This Common Sense Protocol For Relaxation](#)

[Podcast Episode 203: Reactive, Unmotivated and Fearful: Finding Resiliency For This! Beyond Dog Training Part 1](#)

[Podcast Episode 204: Dog Behavior And Diet: Recovery For This! Beyond Dog Training Part 2](#)

[Podcast Episode 252: The Raw Feeding Guide To Training Your Dog With All Forms Of Treats](#)

[YouTube Video: 15 Ways To Exercise Your Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 92: Avoid This Big Mistake When Feeding Your Dog](#)



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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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