Managing Fussy Eaters

There aren't too many dog owners that have not found themselves in the situation of hovering over their dog crooning and cajoling them to eat what is in their bowl. Then fussing about trying to find something the dog will eat. Well, there you go, the dog has you trained. Trained to get it food it likes rather than what is in the bowl. Your dog knows that if it waits long enough, sure enough, something really tasty shows up. Mission accomplished. Owner happy, dog happy and dog just won round one. Many owners are fixated on their dog's eating habits. That only makes things get worse and worse.

Owners of finicky eaters are constantly changing their diet to get them to eat. This only makes your dog hold out to see if anything better is being offered. Find and stick with a nutritious diet for your pet.

If you make sudden diet changes, this causes digestive upsets for your dog. Any diet changes need to be done slowly. Add a small amount of new food to your pet's current food and gradually increase that amount while decreasing the amount of the current food over a seven to ten day period. But right now what we are discussing is NOT catering to a fusspot – so changing foods constantly isn't going to help matters any.

Finicky eaters are not born! They are made. Yes it is hard to see that sweet face sitting there with a stricken look on his face, begging you for "food" – even though the bowl HAS food in it. You worry about whether he is going to get hungry, and just want to make sure he eats, and so we give in going against our better judgment and find something "special". As you might have guessed, this kind of behavior is not just a one-time thing. Once your dog knows it can wrangle something else out of you, it will keep on keeping on until it gets right out of hand. And if you think feeding him later will be easier, think again. It only gets worse. This type of behavior needs to be nipped in the bud immediately. Besides, who is the Alpha dog here anyhow – YOU or the dog?

You have likely also been in the situation where you have purchased a whole swack of types of dog food (canned and dry) to let your dog figure out what he likes. Not a good idea, because if he doesn't like anything, three guesses who will be running out and trying to find something better. Right – you! Chances are also that your dog loves people food. Uh-huh! This also isn't a good idea either. Really, if you were a dog wouldn't YOU want to have the steak on the table rather than the kibble in the bowl?

If you have a dog like this (finicky eater) in the majority of cases, you've wound up using Unintentional Negative Training to cement poor eating habits in your dog. It is unintentional because you didn't intend to train your dog to be fussy about food. It's negative because of the reinforcements given to the dog – the pleading, hovering etc. and it's training as ALL of our interactions with dogs (and vice versa) is education or training.
So – what do you do then?

SOLUTIONS

Well let's take a look at what you can do to stop this type of behavior. First thing is, if you can manage it don't even let it get started. If it happens there are things you can do to stop it.

The basic rule of thumb is if your dog is hungry enough, they WILL eat no matter what is in the bowl. You just have to make up your mind to wait him out. Have patience and ye shall be rewarded. Don't hover, plead, cajole, hand feed him out of the bowl, add anything to it or change the food. Just leave it in the bowl and ------- WAIT!! Note: the exception to this rule is when a dog who normally has good eating habits doesn't eat, then look for medical reasons.

This isn't to say that over time you can't decide to change his food, as many dog owners will do that so their dog has a variety in their diet. Makes sense when you think about it, because who in their right mind would WANT to eat the same meal twice a day for X number of years? If you wouldn't want to do that, then neither would your dog.

This is the point to mention that you will likely want to feed your dog high end holistic commercial food and/or a homemade (BARF or raw) diet. If you want your dog to EAT with gusto, these foods will guarantee that happens. So when you do decide to switch (commercial foods) then you will still have the same high quality you have come to appreciate. The results of feeding this type of diet will show clearly in your dog's good health, coat, attitude and energy levels.

If on the other hand you are just switching to see what your dog likes and trying to give him choices, then you may be creating a monster. Your pet will only demand as much variety as he's come to expect. If he expects lots of variety, he may just become finicky. And perhaps he already has, or you would not be reading this book thinking "Holy cow – that's Farley to a T!"

Table Scraps

Don't do it! Plain and simple don't start the habit of feeding the dog from the table. You WILL live to regret it later. Not to mention the fact that what we eat is NOT a good diet for your dog – not unless it is raw (BARF diet). Homemade diets are different than feeding table scraps. Feeding scraps isn't recommended, as they are high in fat and deficient in nutrients. What your dog needs is a full range of proper nutrients in the right amounts in an easily digestible format.

Table scraps DO have their good points. There is an enormous difference between good quality leftovers and "scraps". The quality leftovers are the pieces of steak (trimmed of fat), roast beef, chicken or turkey. Adding this to your dog's bowl is fine, only when done IN MODERATION. In addition leftover pasta, and rice are good, so long as they are minus the butter or
other fatty sauces and are plainly cooked. Don't over feed scraps on a continuous basis. A diet too high in fat will cause stomach upsets, diarrhea and other potentially serious gastrointestinal disorders such as pancreatitis which is life threatening.

A Schedule

The value of having your dog on a timetable can't be over emphasized. Dogs thrive on routine, and besides, if you don't establish a routine and stick to it, your dog will implement one himself. Dogs without routines and a "pack leader" take over the roles themselves and you won't like the consequences. If you feed regularly at the same time (or close to it) daily then when the food hits the floor then your dog will be there to eat it – and will in fact learn to anticipate being fed. If you never thought dogs (or other animals) could tell time, try missing your regular feeding time one day.

Here is the most effective thing to do when you feed a finicky dog. Feed at the regular time and if they do not eat the food within 15 minutes, you take the bowl up and put the food back in the fridge. The next time that bowl comes out and goes down on the floor is the second feeding of the day. Period! Watch how fast your dog catches on to the fact if he doesn't eat when the food is there, it's GONE.

Do NOT keep offering it every hour throughout the day. All he learns then is to eat when he wants to eat and he's just succeeded in winning round two if you let him. You aren't going to be able to offer your dog his food hourly every day to see if he will eat, not if you work or have a life. So for your own sake and his, set a schedule and stick to it. Regular mealtimes promote good digestion and good general health.

Be on the look out for the "sneaky" treater in your family. The sneaky treater can sabotage all your planning and meals by sneaking your dog treats without rhyme or reason, or feeding them from the table without regard to what you are trying to accomplish with your dog. In other words, the sensible eating program you are trying to set up will not work worth a darn if someone is giving out treats or table goodies willy-nilly.

By the way if your dog happens to be a member of the Garbage Raiders, make sure that habit is stopped cold. Keep your cans firmly closed with those snap down lids, and don't let your dog roam the neighborhood investigating other people's garbage. Garbage may not only cause digestive upsets but your dog also runs the risk of consuming toxic or contaminated food or chemicals.

There most definitely are times and circumstances when you would expect your dog to be finicky. For instance, many dogs eat less during the hot summer months. Some dogs will eat less to control their caloric intake. It's important that you feed your pet a high-quality, balanced pet food and stick with it. Lighten up on the treats given throughout the day as well until you have him on a well-oiled feeding schedule and he's not giving you grief over what you're feeding him.