

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

Dogs Eating Poo!

Coprophagia is the term used to label the behaviour of a dog that eats its own, or other animals' faeces. Most people find this behaviour unacceptable in the extreme. It is understandably disgusting to see your dog eating poo, and the foul breath that results is stomach-churning. But is it harmful, and is it abnormal?

It is certainly normal for dams (bitches with puppies) to eat the excretions of their puppies: this ensures that the den area, and the puppies, stay clean and hygienic. In some dogs, coprophagia may be displaced caring behaviour, a desire to keep their environment clean and care for the rest of their pack. It is also common for puppies to eat their own and other dogs' faeces, possibly because they have learnt this behaviour from their mother. In general, puppies outgrow this behaviour and it is not a cause for concern.

There may be a genetic factor involved in coprophagia. Some breeds (such as German Shepherds) are more inclined to this behaviour. There is also a possible evolutionary link, in that wild dogs and wolves may sometimes eat the contents of the intestines of their prey.

Eating the poo of other animals, particularly that of cats, birds and people, is fairly common because of those animals' diets. For example, a cat's diet is much higher in protein than a dog's diet, and so cat poo literally smells irresistible to a dog.

Another cause of this behaviour is anxiety, which is usually related to environmental stress. Dogs react in many different ways to stress, and coprophagia is one of them. In this case, the dog will probably start eating poo suddenly, when it has not done so before.

It is rare that dogs eat faeces because of a dietary deficiency. Many people think they are attempting to re-digest certain proteins or increase the fibre content of their diet. In most cases, it is a psychological problem, not a physical one.

This behaviour can be both normal, and abnormal, depending on the cause of the behaviour. For example, if it is a puppy it is probably normal, but if you've just moved house and your older dog starts eating poo, it is probably abnormal. It can be harmful in that the dog

can ingest worms, but otherwise it is mostly harmless. If your dog displays this behaviour, it is important to de-worm them regularly.

Punishing a dog that exhibits this behaviour is not a good idea. You do not want your dog to associate faeces (especially their own) with fear because this will likely lead to other behavioural problems. Putting foul smelling and tasting substances on the poo hardly ever works.

The main approach to solving this problem is interrupting the habit of eating poo. Firstly, make sure that all faeces are cleaned up often, simply to ensure that nothing is available for them to eat. Do not allow the dog to see you picking up their poo; if they see you taking it, it may reinforce the idea of faeces as a valuable resource. When walking your dog, keep them on a leash so that you can keep them away from the faeces of other dogs and animals. Give your dog more, smaller meals during the day: this may help to satisfy their appetite. When you catch them eating poo, try and distract them by offering them a treat or their favourite toy. If this doesn't work, just ignore them and make sure you pick up that poo quickly next time! If you think that the problem may be anxiety-related, contact a dog behaviourist to help you with the problem.

Katherine Brown BA HONS PSYCH (UJ)

Dog Behaviourist

kbehave@gmail.com

Copyright Katherine Brown 2010