



Fido Files: Feeding your Fussy Friend

Working at Tail Blazers, I hear this all the time “My dog won’t eat anything unless I put cheese/gravy/steak/fill-in-the-blank on it!” It always makes me wonder how their pet got that way when my dogs eat pretty much anything I drop in front of them. I have a few ideas to help prevent a fuss-fest at dinnertime...

Cut out the Free Feeding!

Free feeding is leaving food out all day for your dog or cat to pick at to their heart’s content. While this is convenient should you have to be out for a few days (in the case of your cat) is not a great idea for a number of reasons. Firstly, your pet never is truly hungry because they have an all day buffet meaning they are going to be less likely to try new foods or eat when you need them to. It can also contribute to some health issues including weight problems, so just forget the free feeding altogether!

What should you do if your pet turns their nose up? Give them 5 minutes to eat and remove the food if they don’t eat it and then wait until the next mealtime to put it down again. Yes, your cat may howl, or your dog may look at you with those hungry puppy-dog eyes, but if you hold out your pet will learn to eat when the food is available, rather than having the comfort that it will always be there for them. Your pet will catch on to the new schedule sooner than you think!

Cut out the Toppers and Gravies!

I think the biggest mistake that people make when feeding their pets is jumping too quickly to entice them to eat. For instance, with cats if you decide to change your cat’s food and they don’t eat it right away, replacing it with the old food or putting “toppers” on the food immediately to get them to eat actually teaches them that if they turn their nose up to your offerings, that something better will come. And, believe me it doesn’t take them long to train you!

I hear time after time from people who buy their pet’s healthy food and put those grocery store gravies on top to get them to eat it. You are defeating the purpose of healthy eating (pouring sugar, salt and probably artificial colours, flavours and preservatives on top of their food) and you are not a short order cook, so teach your pets that if they don’t eat at dinnertime, they’ll have to wait until their next mealtime.

Don’t Make Mealtime a Media-worthy Event!

Sigh; please don’t be one of those folks who hand or spoon-feeds their pet at meal time (unless advised by your dog trainer for behavioral issues). YES, I have heard it before! What you may be doing is making mealtime about attention and love from you instead of about the food. It’s almost like an “attention topper” on the food. Just put the food down, and go about your business as usual. Make sure you provide lots of special time with your pet during walks, training, cuddles, etc.



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Summary

1. Choose two meal times during the day that work with your schedule – even if it's not at exactly the same time every day, it's better to be a little off schedule than to free feed.
2. Place the food down and remove the uneaten portion after 5 minutes. If your pet has not eaten, that's ok – they'll eat at the next meal (some pets cannot be fasted, please ask your vet if you are unsure).
3. Do not add toppers or gravies immediately to your pet's food to entice them to eat.
4. Don't make dinner a love-fest. Put the food down, and get back to whatever it is you were doing.
5. Keep in mind that if your pet has genuinely lost their appetite, it could be due to extreme heat temperatures outside, stress, they are just not hungry because they have stopped growing or become less active, they could be bored of their food, OR it could be a serious medical problem, so visit your vet if you are unsure.

I have always been a fan of variety, and don't force my pets to eat food they genuinely don't like – so if your pet does not like the food you have introduced, and you have given it a good college try, then give them a meal you know they will like next meal time, but don't doctor it up and give it back to them immediately.

Remember, I am not saying to never give your pet palatable food they like. If you want to add healthy toppers to your pet's food (like high-quality canned food, plain yogurt, left-over chicken breast, etc), that's great! The key is in the timing and to remember that whatever you put down, it is your expectation that your pet will eat it—accept no less!

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