

Dear Dr. Mulder: When one of my dogs poops outside in our very large fenced backyard, the other dog stands behind and grabs his droppings "fresh from the oven." If the poop has been outside frozen, then they both enjoy "poopsicles". I have done all the obvious things: yelled at them - picked it up - even put hot sauce & pepper on it to stop the behaviour to no avail. **I want to know WHY they do this and can it be STOPPED?**

Your dog's peculiar food fetish is not unusual nor in the realm of dogs is it considered a problem. Its just us humans who find it disgusting!! There are several theories as to why dogs enjoy these fresh or frozen treats. Some believe that it is a instinct driven behaviour to help puppies get the right bacteria into their lower bowels. Others think that since dogs mark their territory with scents from the anal glands that eating another dog's scat will remove their mark. High levels of undigested fat or protein in a diet can leave a "tasty" aroma as well. I think that the it may have one of the above causes but it becomes a fixed and prominent behaviour due to our response to it. Most of us are so grossed out by the idea that we respond dramatically. Puppies, being the playful and impish creatures that they are, love to get that response from us. What may have started with innocent behaviour, becomes the forbidden fruit. In winter, the frozen "poopsicles" seem to have a particular appeal as when confronted, they will toss it in the air and run away clenching their treasure in their teeth. Similar to digging, the puppy is the one with the ability to start the behaviour and we are powerless to stop it. It becomes such a thrill for them that you almost see them smile when they do it! All efforts we make from yelling at them to putting hot sauce on the droppings we find in the yard are completely in-effective.

The best solution is to prevent the inadvertent rewarding of this oral fixation. As puppies, feeding a highly digestible food and scooping up immediately after is the best plan. If it does happen on occasion, ignore the behaviour. When training dogs, punishment must be 100% consistent to be effective. We humans usually lack the discipline to be that consistent. The most effective deterrents are not connected with us at all. Supplements to alter the taste of the poopsicle may help. The breath mint "Certs" contains chlorophyll that is not supposed to taste good the second time around. MSG, the food additive is apparently foul tasting too. There are products that contain MSG at a level that is not toxic to pets that are sold to deter the behaviour.

Once the behaviour is started, your best success will come from a combination of taste aversion, diet change, removal of opportunity, and distraction with a more rewarding behaviour such as playing fetch. Diet change simply creates a new taste to the droppings that creates an opportunity for you to interfere. The best way to prevent opportunity with multiple dogs is to let them out one at a time and scoop up before letting the other outside. Distraction training is probably your best bet. Clicker training, that is where a sound is paired with a desired behaviour that is well rewarded, is an extremely effective way of giving remote control rewards to your dog. There is a lot of information on the web about that training technique.

Last but not least, it provides another opportunity for me to stress the benefits of brushing your dog's teeth. After munching on such disgusting treats, who wants chocolate kisses? Brushing not only gets rid of any residue and odour but has long lasting health benefits too.