

Sit Happens



Photo by Animax

Tips and Techniques for Training Your Pet with Trudi Thorpe - dogLOGIC

Trudi Thorpe runs a dog behaviour and training company dogLOGIC based in Sydney. As Trudi says "DOGS, DOGS, DOGS... A childhood obsession that I never grew out of." She devises and implements individual behavioural strategies and obedience techniques based on 18 years of studying dog problems and problem dogs.

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Ask Trudi a question regarding behaviour by emailing behaviour@urbananimal.net

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Dear Trudi.

I am writing to you about our 5 year old pug, Dolly. She seems to have a serious foot fetish – with her feet, not ours! She spends a LOT of time lying around with her two front legs out in front of her and her feet together, so she can lick both of them at the same time. Sometimes, she will be doing it for ages and I have to say something to her. She will stop if I tell her to, but the minute I turn my back she starts licking again. I have checked her feet and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with them, or at least anything there that requires such attention. She seems to have become quite obsessed with it, and I don't know if I should stop it or just ignore it. What do you think?

Libby Carter.

Hi Libby.

Anytime there is an odd behaviour involved, it is important to rule out the medical. If everything is ok medically, then you can adopt a behaviour modification protocol that directly targets the specific problem. This type of licking is usually behavioural, however repetitive licking in one spot can cause local sensitivity and local irritation, which if not dealt with may turn into a lick granuloma – or open sore. Dogs that have this tendency are always most likely to lick their front feet and sometimes their back feet. The main reason they choose this part of their body is pure convenience - the feet are the more convenient to get to than the rest of their body.

The exact reason as to why they do it is largely unclear, but there is sufficient reason for us to believe that it results from situations that evoke conditions such as stress, anxiety or boredom. A foot licking problem may also start out as a medical one, and later develop into a learned behaviour, not dissimilar to that of nail biting in humans.

Because of the medical and behavioural implications associated with obsessive licking, it is important to stop it before it develops into something more sinister.

There are several products on the market with a bitter taste that discourage them from licking their feet, but probably the best way to go about dealing with this particular 'foot fetish', is redirection. Like with any training, time, patience and consistency are the absolute keys to achieving and maintaining successful outcomes, along with using incentives that redirect Dolly's attention away from her feet like playing a game or using toys to distract her. This will be a lot more effective than just band-aiding the problem with a product. Following up with positive reinforcement will further cement the foundations to successfully "breaking the habit".

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