



Rutland Dog Training

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Predicting Mealtimes by Adam Beral

Hi there. Ellie is a six year old Collie cross who seems to dominate her feeding times! We started feeding her twice a day at 8am and 6pm. She became extremely excitable, barking, whining and jumping up at the worktop during food preparation. We always make her sit before she receives her food in an attempt to control her. However, over the past six months, Ellie has begun to dominate her feeding times by whining and barking earlier and earlier. She is now being given her evening feed at 3pm (she starts whining at least hour before) as she makes so much noise it is impossible to ignore her. What can we do to keep her feeding times as consistent as possible and stop her telling us when she is hungry?

This is a wonderful example of how our dogs can sometimes train their owners! Ellie obviously values her mealtimes very highly (possibly with very good reason – you never know for certain with rescue dogs) and has learnt that when she displays certain behaviours she will be fed.

Assuming that what you are experiencing is a behavioural problem and not a medical one, in order to reach a solution you are going to have to do two main things. Firstly, you need somehow to devalue the importance of the specific mealtime. The second more problematic task is to stop rewarding her whining, barking behaviour by feeding her.

To address the first issue, I would suggest taking some of the excitement off the mealtime. Consider giving her smaller, more frequent meals or better still no meals at all – provide all of her food in treat form as rewards for completing training exercises. If that is not manageable, leave her with a food dispensing toy that she can gain food from over a longer period of time. As you may have noticed if you have been following my column since the start, I am a big fan of food dispensing toys for all manner of problems!

The next, more difficult, task is to make sure that you do not feed her when she is whining and barking. This means that you either need to ignore her (easier said than done) or do something to prevent her from whining and barking in the first place. You could try giving her the food dispensing toy early, before she gets excited. This way she will hopefully feel satiated and not begin her whining behaviour. Alternatively, take her mind off her hunger by taking her for a walk leading up to meal times (and maybe do some training so she can earn some tasty treats!)



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This is unlikely to be the sort of problem that can be solved in one easy session, so make sure that you set yourself a list of training rules and make sure that everyone in the household signs up to them. You may follow your training regime carefully, but if someone else is feeding Ellie when she is whining, the behaviour will not go away. Long term, I would vary Ellie's mealtimes so that she doesn't fall into a routine again. Good luck, and do let me know how you get on!

Originally published in the Rutland and Stamford Mercury, 7th January 2011