

AGGRESSION BETWEEN FAMILY DOGS

Your dogs are in the back yard and they attack each other any time another dog walks by. You are watching T.V. in the evening and your dogs start to fight after they have both been soliciting you for attention. When one dog returns home from the veterinarian or groomer, he is attacked. You gave your dogs each a delicious bone and they begin to fight over them. One dog may be giving in to the other dog and is still being attacked. Greeting you at the door or rough and tumble play triggers a fight. These are all examples of the fighting that can occur between family dogs.

What Causes Fighting Between Family Dogs?

Conflict and fighting between family dogs is a common problem. Why certain dogs can get along well together and others can't isn't well understood. However, in cases presented to several certified applied animal behaviorists, fighting problems seem to occur more often between females than between male dogs or mixed gender (male-female) pairs.

Other factors that influence how well dogs get along together include the breed of the dogs, past history with other dogs, and early socialization experiences. The behavior of the owners and how human family members fit into the dogs' social relationship probably plays a role as well, often in unknown or subtle ways.

The fighting may only occur in specific situations or may be more generalized. For example, the fighting may be only over a certain rawhide toy but not other treats or the dogs' regular food. Dogs may also fight over other resources such as attention from the owner, favorite sleeping spots areas, or first access through doors.

Some dogs may pick a fight in any high arousal situation, such as when the doorbell rings, for no other apparent reason. While conflicts about social status can cause some fighting problems, in many cases the victim dog is clearly not challenging the other dog, but is still attacked. These kinds of fighting problems are particularly poorly understood.

Other motivations include territorial behavior, fear, redirected behavior or play fights that escalate into "real" fights. For a description of common categories of aggression in dogs see the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on dog aggression.

Some dogs may not actively fight but may just posture and threaten one another. These sorts of conflicts may, or may not escalate into fights. Generally, fighting between family dogs does not indicate that the dogs will become aggressive to people, however, people can become injured if they get caught between fighting dogs or if they try to break up a dog fight.

How Can The Fighting Be Resolved?

Fighting problems between family dogs have a variety of outcomes. Many can be resolved successfully, but in some cases they cannot and for the sake of both dogs it is best to find one another home. It's entirely possible either dog will be able to get along well with a different partner.

The first and most important action to take is to prevent the fights from continuing.

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

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Never allow dogs
to fight it out.

It's always a good idea to have both dogs thoroughly examined by your veterinarian to evaluate possible medical causes for the problem. Any medical condition that is making either dog uncomfortable, such as arthritis, may also make her more irritable and more prone to aggressive behavior.

The first and most important action to take is to prevent the fights from continuing. The more the dogs fight, the more difficult the problem becomes to resolve. If you cannot identify when the dogs are likely to fight, they should be separated at all times (except when you are working with them). If you can predict the contexts in which the dogs will fight, then don't allow those situations to develop for the time being. If the dogs can't be separated when they need to be, they should be muzzled when they are together.

The solution to a fighting problem between any set of dogs will depend on the specific reason why they are fighting. In general however, one of the goals is to help the dogs become calm and relaxed in each other's presence, rather than aroused and angry. This is usually accomplished using counter conditioning and desensitization techniques. You can learn more by reading the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on this topic.

Desensitization involves gradually exposing the dogs to one another in less intense versions of the contexts that trigger an aggressive reaction, so that the behavior isn't elicited. Generally, this involves controlling the distance, movement and behavior of the each dog. Combining desensitization with counter conditioning techniques makes the process go more quickly.

Counter conditioning involves changing your dog's emotional state so that he is less aroused, tense, or angry in the situations that currently trigger the aggression. It is difficult for your dogs to fight if they are relaxed and calm and, eating an irresistible treat or enjoying a quiet massage. These emotional states are incompatible with aggression.

For example, if the dogs have been completely separated, begin by feeding them on either side of a closed door to pair good things with being near one another. Gradually progress to feeding them on either side of a baby gate.

If the dogs fight over attention from the owner, reward one dog for lying down quietly while the other is being petted.

If the exposures are done in a controlled, careful and gradual way, the dogs will progressively learn to tolerate the presence of each other in the problem situations. Additional behavior modification is usually necessary. Different behavior modification will be needed for some problems.

These techniques can be dangerous if not properly implemented. You will probably need the help of an experienced certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you work with the problem. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

How Can Fighting Between Family Dogs Be Prevented?

Because the causes of fighting are complex, varied, and not always well understood, it is difficult to give specific recommendations that will prevent most fighting problems. Although female dogs can get along well, playing the odds would dictate not acquiring pairs of female dogs.

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Fighting is not caused
by your lack of
dominance over
your dogs.

Intact (not spayed or neutered) dogs may be more prone to fighting problems. Spaying or neuter your dogs may reduce the likelihood of certain types of aggression.

Allowing the dogs to develop their own social hierarchy rather than giving your favorite dog special privileges may prevent some types of fighting problems. Working with a behavior consultant who can evaluate your particular situation and make recommendations relevant to your dogs will be the best option.

What Not To Do

Do not ignore or rationalize threatening or aggressive behaviors between your dogs. Mild conflicts often escalate to major fights without timely and appropriate intervention. Don't wait to see if your dogs' relationship will improve. Seek professional help sooner rather than later.

Punishing aggressive behavior only escalates an already tense situation and doesn't help your dogs like each other more. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on punishment to learn about its limitations.

Do not intervene in a dog fight with your hands or body and risk injury to yourself or your dogs. Spraying both dogs with Spray Shield™, a citronella deterrent, throwing water on the dogs, or making a startling noise is a much safer way to break up a fight so that the dogs can be separated.

Do not allow your dogs to "fight it out". Once the conflicts between your dogs have risen to the level of fighting they will not be settled by additional fighting. Your dogs can be severely injured and the fights escalate to such a degree that the problem becomes irresolvable.

Fighting between family dogs is not caused by your lack of "dominance" over them. "Alpha rolls" or scruff shakes will not help your dogs like each other better, and can actually increase aggression. Neither will other "dominance procedures" such as taking away privileges from your dogs. While brushing up on your dogs' obedience, may increase your dogs' responsiveness to you, training classes will not solve a fighting problem.

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