



Canine Rivalry

Canine rivalry refers to repeated conflicts between dogs living in the same household. Fights between dogs that live together are actually quite common -- much as fights between human siblings are. With multiple dogs living in close proximity, it's almost inevitable that there will be squabbles over food, bones, toys, owner attention, or sleeping spots. Sometimes your dogs' moods may be out of synch -- for instance, one dog may be feeling playful while another wants to be left alone. Or a rambunctious play session may escalate into a real battle.

Dogs use a variety of signals to convey to each other when their personal space is being violated, when a playmate is too rough, or when they feel a treasured object is being threatened. Some of these signals -- growling, snarling, snapping -- can look like aggression, but usually they're just being used to make a point.

Most of the time, these signals will cause other dogs to back off or lower the intensity of play. But sometimes, the other dog doesn't get the message -- or chooses to ignore it. Then the conflict may intensify into prolonged bouts of dangerous fighting which may result in one or both dogs being injured.

If the conflict between your dogs consists mostly of warnings and bluster, and only last a few seconds, it's probably okay to let them work it out between themselves. But if these behaviors are happening more frequently, lasting longer, or fighting starts to occur, you will need to get more assertive.

What To Do

- ◆ When bringing a new dog into the household, make the introductions as positive as possible. See "Dog-to-Dog Introductions."
- ◆ Be sure to give each dog plenty of individual attention and time alone with you.
- ◆ Establish yourself as the one "in charge." You have all the resources the dog wants/needs, and you decide when the dog receives those resources from you, and when they don't. It is important to make rules for acceptable conduct and to enforce them consistently. For instance, when you're handing out treats, all dogs should sit and wait their turn -- no barging in on each other or trying to steal treats. In this way, they are being rewarded for behaving cooperatively.
- ◆ Remove the triggers that may be causing fights. For instance, every dog should always have his/her own bowl, and not be allowed to go to any other dog's bowl to eat. Feed your dogs in separate areas if there is an aggression problem among them during meal times. If battles over

toys and chewies are a problem, don't leave them lying around the room; only bring them out when you are there to supervise.

- ◆ Give each dog a safe, quiet place to retreat to -- apart from the other dogs -- and keep the other dogs from pestering any dog that is trying to get away or to rest. Each dog should have its own bed or crate.
- ◆ Be sure, when dogs play together, that all dogs involved seem to be enjoying themselves. If one or more dogs is acting frightened, hurt or overwhelmed, it's a good idea for everyone to take a break. Keeping play sessions to shorter and fewer times a day may also help to keep rough play from escalating into fighting.
- ◆ When you see a situation that could escalate into a fight, interrupt it. Make a sound to get the dogs' attention, then get the dogs to settle down or engage in something else. Be sure to praise and reward appropriate behavior once it has gone on for several seconds. This is where training in commands like "watch me" and "sit" can be very helpful.
- ◆ If a fight does break out, don't use your hands or any other part of your body to break it up; dogs that are fighting are likely to bite whatever intervenes.

Use a loud noise, your voice, or water to interrupt the dogs. If that doesn't work, use a chair or other large object between them, or with help, pull them apart by their hind legs. Most dog fights are more noise than injury, but it's never safe to put yourself in the middle of one.

- ◆ Impose time-outs after fights, separating the dogs to give them a chance to calm down. Don't reward them with additional attention, not even with scolding. Don't penalize a dog for using non-injurious "leave me alone" signals. Time-outs should only be for serious aggression or fighting.
- ◆ Use positive reinforcement when dogs are behaving well with each other. Praise and occasionally treat your dogs when they're getting along well.

When to Get Help

Ongoing canine rivalry is potentially dangerous since the dogs could be severely injured. Family members may also be at risk if they get too close or try to intervene when the dogs are fighting.

Because resolving rivalry problems requires managing the dogs' somewhat complex social behaviors, your best bet is to obtain assistance from a professional animal behaviorist. The problem can become more difficult to resolve the longer it goes on, so get help at first signs of an issue.

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.