

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 sync -- 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. Setting up safe rules and boundaries from the beginning will help avoid issues in the future. If you are dealing with a canine rivalry issue that is not getting better or is getting worse, contact a behavior specialist that has experience dealing with inter-household dog issues as soon as possible.

How to Avoid Dog-to-Dog Rivalry

- When bringing a new dog into the household, make the introductions as positive as possible.
- Be sure to give each dog plenty of individual attention and time alone with you.
- Train your dogs separately at first. Dogs cannot work well together until they have mastered the behavior by themselves.
- 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 chews are a problem, don't leave them lying around the room; only bring them out when you are there to supervise or only provide them to your dogs when they are in their kennels.
- 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.
- If you have added a new puppy to your household, do not allow the puppy to continually pester an older dog. If you notice that the older dog is uncomfortable with the interaction or would like to be left alone, remove one of the dogs and put them in their safe, quiet place for a rest period.
- When you see a situation that could escalate into a fight, interrupt it. Make a sound to get the dogs' attention, then redirect the dogs' engagement to 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 "Leave It" and "Relax on a Mat" 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.

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. 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. The problem can become more difficult to resolve the longer it goes on, so get help at first signs of an issue.