

# BEHAVIOR

## When Sibling Rivalry Ignites It's a struggle for leadership of the pack

By Arden Moore

Are your Beagles forever bickering? Is your Schnauzer in a snit over your Shih Tzu? Can't achieve harmony with your Bloodhound and your Harlequin Great Dane?

Dogs sharing a home, just like children, can experience sibling rivalry. They may clash over treats, toys, bedding and even fight for their owner's affection. Unchecked, the occasional growl or snap can escalate into a bloody feud and possible duel to the death.

Sibling rivalry is defined as an unstable social ranking among dogs who live together. The pack order mentality dates back to domestic dogs' wolf ancestors, said Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, MRCVS, director of the Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine.

Dr. Dodman teamed up with Diane Arrington, a professional dog trainer from Dallas, in a presentation on canine sibling rivalry at Tufts Animal Expo in Boston. They also published their views on the subject in a report in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

"Sibling rivalry is perhaps the most emotional issue multi-dog households may face," said Arrington, director of the PetPerfect Academy. "The first tussle is likely to be only a small scrap...and not likely to cause injury. But well-meaning owners can step in and actually worsen the situation. The dogs become increasingly frustrated at not being permitted to resolve the dispute, and they begin to fight more viciously."

Dr. Dodman agreed: "Sibling rivalry is actually a struggle for leadership. The problems become greater when people interfere and support the wrong dog."

### Clear Hierachy

Through years of research and observation, Arrington has discovered that a clearer hierarchy, derived from pack behavior, develops among dogs in the same household. Generally, but not always, the dog's age and length of time in the home are deciding factors in the ranking order, as they are in a wild pack. The oldest dog usually requires the top ranking and respect of the younger dogs, Arrington said.

"One of the most common causes of dog sibling rivalry is inaccurate human evaluation – people sometimes pick the wrong dog as the top ranking dog," said Arrington, author of *Seventh sense: A collection of True, Unsolved Mysteries from the World of Animals* (1<sup>st</sup> books).

Far too often, a younger dog enters the home and family members lavish attention on him. When they greet the newcomer first, play with him first or even feed him, their actions create confusion and frustration among other incumbent dogs.

A power struggle begins. The younger dog, who naturally should be the deferent dog, becomes concerned about maintaining his newfound rank. Contrary to popular belief, the instigator in most household dogfights is not the true dominant but the nondominant one – the lower status dog who feels he must fight to move up in the rankings due to the attention he receives from people in the household.

"Truly dominant dogs are secure in their status and have no reason to fight," Arrington said. "These dogs will fight only if their rank has been challenged, but they do not usually initiate fights."

Are your dogs play fighting or truly feuding? Not sure? Look for these warning clues:

- Play between dogs that escalates to include snarls and growls.
- Dogs start to stand up and paw each other aggressively.
- Battles erupt over prized resources, such as food bowls, favorite toys and even owners.
- One dog may begin to chase the other dog out of the room or stand in front of the owner to block access to the owner.
- Play fighting turns to dirty fighting in which a dog will clamp down and bite another dog's abdomen.

If you experience these situations, book an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out any possible medical cause for these acts of aggression, advised Dr. Dodman.

Equally important is what not to do. Avoid these mistakes that may intensify fighting when you're introducing a new dog to your resident dogs:

- Never put dogs together in a confined space and expect them to get along without a proper introduction.
- Always introduce dogs to each other outside on neutral turf.
- Never introduce a new dog into a home by cradling one dog in your arms. Dogs feel more secure when they have all four paws on the ground.
- Don't let dogs "fight it out" even if they're wearing muzzles.

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- Keep dogs on harnesses or leashes, so you can separate them gently and nonviolently if they start to fight. You can also step on a leash to stop a dog from lunging at the other one.
- Don't feed or give attention first to a new dog or puppy.
- Don't allow a new puppy or dog to have free access inside the home. Confine the younger dog to a room and allow the older dog to roam freely.
- Don't walk the younger dog first.

"Think safety first for both the dogs and the people in the home," Dr. Dodman said, "Do not step in to try to separate fighting dogs by using your hands. Dogs can redirect their aggression toward you and end up biting you."

Sometimes temperament dictates the true top ranking dog. "If a 3-year-old dog has lived in the home much longer than a 5-year-old dog, the top ranking in that case may be decided by temperament testing and the 3-year-old may be the top dog."

To identify the true, dominant dog in the family pack, owners need to examine each dog's temperament based on answers to these questions:

- Which dog tries to own you and your space?
- Which dog tends to seek your affection more than other pets?
- Which dog is the quickest to fight?
- Which dog is willing to fight for highly prized items?

Surprisingly, the dog who pushes hardest for these commodities and is most defensive is often not the dominant one but a dominant wannabee. Dominant dogs act as if to say, "That's mine, but you can borrow it if you want.." Wannabees seemingly say, "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine," i.e., they are less secure. However, when owners have supported the wrong dog for some time, interpretation of rank can be tricky. The true dominant may act depressed or despondent because he has given up on the owners recognizing the true order. With the correct support, these depressed dominants may suddenly regain their confidence and *joie de vivre*.

Dogs try to resolve ranking among them but need family members to support their decisions. After a mild squabble, for example, praise and support the top dog and put the lower ranked dog in a crate or enclosed area. "You are communicating to both dogs that you really do support the top ranking dog and that helps clear up any confusion." Dr. Dodman said.

He also advised that families institute a "Nothing in Life Is Free" program for all dogs in the home. They must always sit first before being fed, sit and wait for people to walk through doorways first, and

be kept off furniture until the canine hierarchy has been identified and honored. Their toys should be in an inaccessible place. Owners bring out a ball or special toy and determine when games begin and end.

"The one constant is that the owners must be seen to be in charge of all dogs in the household, to be viewed as the ultimate pack leader," Dr. Dodman said. "If you're wishy-washy in your rules and conduct, you can expect more behavior problems among your dogs as they jostle to see which one should rank first."

### Provide Exercise

Providing all dogs with daily exercise – a minimum of 20 minutes of brisk walking – can help restore peace. The amount of exercise varies among breeds and individual dogs. Some dogs, such as Border Collies, may require an hour or more of aerobic exercise.

"Exercise elevates serotonin levels in the brain, which improves a dog's mood and reduces the likelihood of aggressive behavior," Dr. Dodman said.

Be choosy about what you put in your dog's food bowls, too. Feed lower levels of protein to calm aggressive behavior. But check with your veterinarian about protein percentages to feed nursing dogs or growing puppies.

Sometime, veterinarians may prescribe medications, such as Prozac, to help decrease dominance behavior or fear aggressiveness insecure dogs display. In most cases, the need for medication is temporary until behavior improves.

Keep in mind the established ranking may change whenever dogs are added to or depart from the family. When this occurs, carefully watch how dogs interact before reassessing who is the natural choice for top dog.

Remain optimistic and consistent in your actions and attitudes.

"Sibling rivalry can be successfully resolved in between 75 to 90 percent of the cases. Often, the non dominant dog that thought he or she had to be in charge is relieved and happy to not have to be in charge anymore. And the true, dominant dog is relieved because finally his people have seen the light!"

*Arden Moore of Oceanside, Calif., is a regular contributor to Your Dog and the "Healthy Pets" columnist for Prevention magazine. Her latest book is Dog Training: A Lifelong Guide (Bow Tie Press).*

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