

INTER-DOG AGGRESSION: WHY DOGS FIGHT

Terry Marie Curtis DVM, MS, DACVB
curtist@ufl.edu

INTER-DOG AGGRESSION

The more common categories of Inter-Dog Aggression are Status-Related, Fear, Arousal, Possessive, Protective, Territorial, Redirected, and Predatory. Intact males are generally aggressive to other males, intact males generally show more aggression than neutered males, neutered males are generally aggressive to other males, and females are generally aggressive to other females.

NON-HOUSEHOLD AGGRESSION

Dogs that are aggressive to other dogs - that are not part of the household - are more likely to show predatory behavior and are often more difficult for owners to control. There may be a component of territoriality in these cases. This would be the case if the dog in question was aggressive to dogs that walk by the house, but okay with dogs on walks and/or at the dog park. In any case, it may be the result of improper socialization or an aversive event – such as being attacked by another dog when a puppy, etc.

AGGRESSION BETWEEN FAMILIAR DOGS

This refers to dogs in the same household. In the vast majority of cases, the aggression seen is the manifestation of canid hierarchical conflicts and/or underlying anxiety. In many cases the dogs that are fighting are uncertain of their role in the hierarchy. This type of aggression is most commonly limited to one pair of dogs – even if other dogs are present. It is typically more common between same-sex dogs.

In general, intra-household aggression more severe than aggression between non-housemates and female-female aggression is typically the most severe. When looking at the two dogs that are fighting, physical features do not necessarily determine dominance. But once there is fighting, the larger and stronger dog will typically “win”...

Common household aggression TRIGGERS include times of excitement such as feeding time, walking, and owner arrival. Other triggers include control over resources, physical proximity, confining areas such as doorways, hallways, etc., and/or the owner's very presence – where the dogs may compete for attention.

Generally, the owner tends to support the victim (subordinate) and punish the aggressor (dominant). This can increase the aggression if the victim perceives a “coalition” between itself and the owner – resulting in it reacting more confidently. In many cases, the *owner's presence and behavior exacerbates the instability between the two dogs and fights may occur when the owner is present*. The behavior may persist in the owner's absence – but most cases present for the dogs fighting *only* when the owner is around.

COMMON TRIGGERS FOR FIGHTS INCLUDE:

Owner interferes when the dogs interact in an attempt to change an established hierarchy

Owner inadvertently or deliberately encourages a subordinate dog to try to establish dominance over the higher-ranking dog

It is important that the dogs be allowed to communicate using their ritual signals – the “soft” conversation – using their eyes, ears, head, body, and tail. A common ritual signal is mounting and it is very often interrupted and/or punished by the owner. If the signaling is interrupted or not allowed in the first place, the “soft” conversation is likely to escalate – to “yelling” – fights. Usually, there isn't a problem between the two dogs as to what the hierarchy is. They understand what the relationship is and signal each other accordingly and appropriately. But if the “normal conversation” is interrupted and/or punished, what's left? Growling. Snapping. Biting.

The onset of household aggression is typically when the younger dog reaches social maturity – at the age of 18 – 24 months old (it can be earlier for females). It can occur if the hierarchy has not been clearly established and is most severe in evenly matched dogs. It can occur when the “dominant” dog is aging or ill. This dog may have increased irritability which can result in decreased tolerance to its housemate. There can also be a “breakdown” in communication as one of the dogs ages [due to loss of vision and/or hearing] and/or experiences cognitive decline. There is an expectation from the other [non-impaired] dog that is no longer being met. This can cause anxiety and resultant aggression towards the dog that’s impaired.

The **TREATMENT** of household inter-dog aggression is going to vary with the individual case. But in general, it is a good idea to separate the dogs when they are not supervised. This isn’t done so much so that the dogs won’t fight when the owner isn’t around, but to avoid the dogs coming together in an aroused situation – when the owner comes home. If the dogs are separated, the owner will have more control in bringing them together. Head collars or good-fitting harnesses are recommended – for both dogs – so that the owner can have the dogs together safely, with more control. Basket muzzles may be needed for one of both of the dogs, depending on the degree of aggression. If the dogs involved are intact, spaying or neutering is recommended.

It is important to determine and stabilize the pack hierarchy – the “relationship”. Look for general trends. Most relationships are fluid and flexible. The dog that is acting “appropriate” in a given situation is the one that should be rewarded. If there is a clear dominant/subordinate relationship that the dogs agree on, then it should be recognized and supported. The dominant dog should be fed first, given attention first, given access to preferred locations, let inside & outside first, etc. – especially in the beginning of treatment. As the relationship becomes more “normal” and fluid this strict order may be relaxed. The key is to watch the anxiety level of each of the dogs and adjust your behavior accordingly.

Along the same lines, it’s important to allow and reward the dogs’ ritualized signaling. For the dominant dog these include: eye stare, ears up, tail up, lips up – exposing canine teeth, and mounting. For the submissive dog these include looking away, ears back, tail down, the “submissive grin” (seeing all of the teeth), and standing to be mounted. The submissive dog may also lick the other dog’s muzzle.

Clients often attempt to impose “democracy” to the household – which doesn’t tend to work. It is important that the clients understand how canine societies are structured and how dogs communicate. Client education is key! There is a common misconception that the dog that has seniority should dominate the new dog. This just isn’t always the case. A dog’s social rank is determined by its ability to defend priority access to resources and not by seniority *per se*. An older or sick dog may not be capable of defending these privileges and/or it may no longer want to.

In many situations there are mixed signals. For example:

Dog A is dominant to Dog B
Dog A knows it and Dog B knows it
They signal each other appropriately
Owner reinforces Dog B as dominant
Dog B *knows* that is submissive to Dog A

Both dogs are getting reverse signals from the “BIG Alpha” – which can be a great source of confusion and anxiety...

In general, the aggression typically occurs in situations that involve competition over valuable resources and aims at establishing a dominance-deference relationship.

There may be times when the owner will need to “finish the conversation” for the dogs. For example:

Dog A looks at Dog B
Dog B looks away
Dog A continues to look/stare and starts to growl
Dog A is being inappropriate. Both dogs need to be given a “way out”. So at that point, the owner can call one of the dogs over – Dog A – and reward him/her for coming. An alternative would be to shake a bag or can of treats – diffusing the situation so that both dogs can get away from the tense situation.

Another example:

Dog A looks at Dog B

Dog B isn't paying attention to Dog A [this is particularly true if Dog B is a puppy or a dog with physical impairments and/or cognitive decline]

Dog A continues to look/stare and starts to growl

Again, Dog A is being "inappropriate" – but so is Dog B, through no fault of its own. The owner can diffuse the situation by calling the dog most likely to come – again, giving both of the dogs a way out of the tense situation.

MEDICATION may be necessary – especially if one or both dogs are particularly anxious. Anxiety can lead to reactivity and reactivity can result in aggression. Any of the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as fluoxetine, paroxetine or sertraline, or the tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) such as clomipramine can be used effectively. The goal here is to decrease anxiety and reactivity so that the dogs can start to "listen" again to what the other is actually saying.

When and how should the owner interfere?

Excessive dominance displays – especially if a true fight is likely to occur

Aggressive displays that do not cease when subordinate dog defers

If the subordinate dog does not signal the dominant dog appropriately

The important thing is to diffuse the situation without increasing the arousal. Call whichever dog is more likely to come to you – ideally, the dominant dog. This provides for preferential attention and reinforces owner control.

The problem may not be resolvable with two evenly matched dogs that are strongly motivated to be "alpha". They are likely to fight until one succeeds in injuring the other. In cases like this the owner needs to withdraw privileges from *both* dogs and interrupt dominance displays by *both* dogs. The owner can randomize the order of feeding and handling, and desensitize and counter-condition the dogs to each other's proximity. It is always important to continue to look for ritualized signals and reward them.

The prognosis is poorer if the initiator is younger and/or more able-bodied than the target, if a person has been bitten, and/or if the aggression is truly "unpredictable".