

**Aggression between household dogs**  
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Introduction

Fights between dogs within the same household are usually about competition - or social status, in other words, which dog gets what and when. These fights commonly occur when dogs reach social maturity (between 12-36 months of age). Fights will be about access to those resources that are considered most important to dogs. These include food, resting-places, territory, favored possessions, and favored people. Common triggers for fights include treats, owner attention, greeting the owners, sleeping positions near the owner, entering or exiting the home, high arousal situations such as fence running, or movement through tight spaces. These fights occur most often between dogs of the same sex and seem to be most severe between female dogs<sup>1</sup>. Fighting can also occur due to underlying anxiety, poor social communication skills by one or both dogs or concurrent with other anxiety conditions. Conflicts can occur between dogs where the dominance status is ambiguous, in other words they appear to be close in rank, or fights can occur between dogs where one dog appears to be dominant. In some situations it may be difficult to determine which dog is the dominant one, and often dominance can be context specific with one dog dominant in one situation, and the other dog dominant in another. Contrary to what is commonly believed, hierarchies may not be strictly linear. When dogs within a household fight, the fighting can be severe and injurious to both the humans and the dogs. Under no circumstances should the dogs be encouraged to "fight it out", this can result in severe injury and/or death.

*History taking and diagnosis*

Fighting between dogs within a household can have several different underlying motivations.

- A younger, larger, more agile dog challenges an older, previously dominant dog.
- Aggression can occur between dogs that were raised together, and are now reaching social maturity with a resulting shift in the social relationship.
- Interdog aggression can occur when the dominant dog leaves the household for some reason and the existing dogs try to restructure the hierarchy.
- When a new dog enters the home.
- Poor social communication skills
- Redirected aggression due to other stimuli or anxieties
- Bullies History taking should focus on the following points:
- The progression of the aggression; this may help indicate causation and/or maintenance factors for the behavior. Have owners give detailed descriptions of at least the 3 most recent episodes and the first episode.
- What circumstances do the owners believe elicit the aggression? (This often is revealed in the description of various episodes)
- What were the owners doing, and how did they respond to the aggressive behavior of either dog.
- Was punishment used? If so, what type and how was it applied and to which dog?
- The length of time that the aggression has been present and the injuries of the dogs to date. This often helps in determining prognosis. Severe injuries may indicate lack of inhibition and a poor prognosis.
- The ages of the animals involved may also determine treatment and prognosis.
- Owner ability to identify and predict aggressive episodes as well as ability to understand and carry out treatment recommendations will affect results.
- Body postures and eye contact of the dogs both during fights at home and while in the consultation room. Which dogs stares, and which dogs "avoids"?
- Did one dog defer and the other dog not recognize deference and attack anyway?
- Did one dog attack without any warning signals?

## *Treatment*

Aggression between household dogs may be difficult to treat. The first step in therapy is explaining canine dominance hierarchies to pet owners and how their behavior influences the relationship between the dogs within the home. The concept of dominant and subordinate relationships between animals was developed from observation of animals (wolves, baboons, chickens) living in social groups<sup>2</sup>. Social hierarchies arranged around dominant and subordinate relationships decrease the conflict associated with the allocation of critical resources, i.e. food, shelter, mates and territory<sup>2</sup>. When living in social groups, canids will establish dominance hierarchies that may dictate access to certain resources such as food, resting-places, favored possessions, territory and mates but may or may not involve aggression<sup>3</sup>. Certainly, a case could be made that dominance behavior may occur without aggression and instead be about control of the outcome. In addition, dominance is then the quality of the relationship between two individuals, not a characteristic of an individual themselves, i.e. you cannot be dominant in isolation. In domestic canid groupings, overt aggression is rare and deference common<sup>4</sup>. Another tool used as assessment between individuals in the concept of resource-holding potential. Resource-holding potential is used as an index of competitive ability and allows mutual assessment and the prediction of outcome between individuals<sup>5</sup>. So, individuals can assess the strength of their opponent, perhaps through play. Besides strength, the relative value of the resource to each individual also comes into play<sup>5</sup>.

Sometimes the problem presents such that one dog is clearly dominant to the other, and the subordinate dog does not challenge if the owners do not interfere. If left alone, dogs will often use posturing and threats to end encounters without injury. This may also happen between two dogs just experience a shift in hierarchy. Another common owner error is the desire to make life "fair". This often results in owners allowing subordinate dogs access to resources, such as owner attention, treats etc., entry into territory, that they would not normally have. The dominant dog may have always been pushy and resort to becoming aggressive toward the subordinate dog to "enforce the rules". This usually results in punishment for the dominant dog. The subordinate dog then learns it can engage in prohibited behavior while the owner is present, in essence creating an "alliance" of owner and subordinate dog against the higher-ranking individual. Conversely, the dominant dog may learn that the presence of the subordinate dog signals punishment when the owners are present. At times no fighting occurs when the owners are gone, in fact the owners often leave the dogs together because they never come home to an injured dog. Fighting may not occur while the dogs are alone because they are aware of the hierarchy and often the subordinate dog does nothing to challenge the dominant animal. In this situation, if there has not been injury to either dog, and the aggression has been limited to threats, treatment has a better prognosis. There also can be situations where the aggression between dogs is not about dominance, but due to underlying anxiety in one of the dogs that reacts inappropriately to situations in the environment and may elicit the aggression from a housemate. Or one dog may be aggressively aroused by some other stimuli that it cannot get to and redirect the aggressive response to a housemate. In other situations one dog may not read social communication well or not signal their intent. This may be manifest by a dog that attacks another dog showing deferential signals or attacks without any warnings such as stiffening, eye contact, growling or snarling.

The first goal of treatment is to prevent further fighting and injury to the dogs and the humans. The owners must take total control of the environment. The fighting dogs are separated when unsupervised or left home alone. When the owners are home the dogs should be dragging leashes, and either wearing headcollars and/or muzzles. In some situations dogs are not allowed to roam freely when owners are present, but are restrained by a leash to a piece of furniture in a "tie-down". The dog designated as the "leader" dog gets the more preferred location in the room. It is imperative that the dogs be far enough apart so that they cannot make contact with each other. It is also helpful for

owners to learn how to recognize canine body language and low-level threats such as eye contact, snarls or low growls. Owners are also instructed to keep records of threats, attacks, or tension producing situations. The owner needs to feel confident that control of the dogs is possible, and no further injury is going to occur. Physical punishment is contraindicated and counterproductive. Pain can cause aggression and even the threat of pain may increase aggressive behaviors. If any medical conditions that cause pain appear to be evident, those should be identified and treated.

If underlying anxiety, redirected aggression or a dog with impaired communication skills, are not evident, treatment is often centered on supporting the chosen dominant dog. The history should help identify through body postures and responses of the dogs which dog that should be. In some cases this is the younger, bigger, more physically capable dog. At other times a technique called "elder support" is used which entails supporting the dog that is older and has been in the home the longest<sup>5</sup>. If one of the dogs is a bully, has poor communication skills, or has another underlying anxiety that dog should not be supported as the leader dog. Whichever technique is chosen, it means that the dominant dog has access to everything first-to go outside, to come in, food, owner attention, entry into rooms where the dominant dog and owner are. If the owner is petting the dominant dog and the subordinate dog approaches, the subordinate is sent away and made to wait. Equally important for successful treatment is to avoid all circumstances that elicit aggression. If the more dominant dog approaches the subordinate dog and the subordinate dog assumes subordinate postures and the encounter ends, the owners are not to intervene. In other situations one dog may be a "bully" and not allow any other dog to have status. In this case, the owner must make every effort to create a stable hierarchy by the technique described below.

Another technique is for the owner to take the leadership role and control all dogs. This is especially helpful when one dog is a "bully" and doesn't allow any other dog to have status or has impaired social skills. All privileges are withdrawn from all dogs. The circumstances that elicit aggression are avoided. Owners are told to keep greetings low key, avoid treats and rawhides unless separated or on leash, avoid or control movement through tight spaces. The owner is instructed to train each dog separately to commands for sit, stay and down to increase control. Then, the dogs are put into subordinate positions such as sit/stay or down/stay and only allowed to interact with the owner at owner commands to give structure to the environment and their interactions with the dogs. The owner controls all interactions and access to food, resting places, territory, owner attention and treats. The owner is to not play "favorites" but treat the dogs equally at all times. The dogs are leashed when in the house together, and the leashes fastened to furniture.

Another helpful treatment modality is to have the dogs interact in a situation that is neutral where they are both happy. This could be a walk. It is usually best to have two individuals to walk the dogs and not to allow them to forge in front of one another. Another helpful training situation is to feed the dogs at a distance (if food guarding aggression is not a problem), far enough apart that they do not show aggression. Slowly the dishes are moved closer together as long as the dogs do not react. The food serves as a passive reward in this situation. If the dogs react, the food bowls are moved further apart. When the owner is not home or supervising the dogs, the dogs are separated or crated. It is also important to talk to owners about how to break up fights should they occur. If the dogs do fight care must be exercised in breaking up fights to avoid owner injury. Loud noises (fog horns), water, or grabbing the dogs by their back legs can help end the fighting. Owners should be warned to avoid grabbing the head or collar or they may be bitten. When owners intervene in fights, redirected aggression is possible. Redirected aggression is aggression (growl, snarl or bite) redirected to a person, animal or object other than that which evoked the aggression. If during the course of a dogfight, one owner picks up an animal, the other animal may continue to attack and direct that

attack at them. Dogs can also redirect aggression under other circumstances as well including dominance aggression, possessive aggression, and territorial aggression and during attention seeking behaviors<sup>8</sup>.

Anxiolytic medication may be appropriate for either the victim or the aggressor in some cases. Dogs with impaired social communication skills and/or underlying anxieties often benefit from the use of an SSRI. If the problem is due to another problem such as separation anxiety, territorial behaviors or a medical problem causing pain, those issues must also be addressed.

Prognosis can be extremely variable. When blending households, some family members may refuse to make one dog subordinate even if it is willing and clearly the other dog is dominant.

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