



Dog Aggression in the Home

The most common dog fights are between dogs that live in the same home. Dogs have complex social hierarchies and interactions. They have personalities and opinions and moods. All of these things will change and evolve as they develop, age, and have life experiences.

Often, we are unable to find the specific cause of aggression between family dogs. Body language and triggers can be subtle. We may think that nothing has really changed so why is this behavior starting or becoming worse?

Physiology/Biology

- ♥ Age: Young dogs maturing (8-14months usually) will try to become dominant while dogs that are aging (8+years usually) will start to lose dominance.
 - Maintain current dominance -feed dominant pet first, give them toys first, give affection first. Then make them wait as you give affection to the next lesser dominant pet and so forth.
 - Allow the dominant pet on the couch/bed but the lesser dominant on the floor.
 - Allow the dominant pet to go through a door first.
- ♥ Reproductive Status: All intact animals (not spayed or neutered) will be more prone to aggression due to breeding behavior. If a pet is spayed/neutered at a later age and/or after already breeding, their behavior may not change significantly after surgery or retirement from breeding.
 - Spay/neuter EVERY pet at a young (but healthy) age.
- ♥ Health: Any pet with declining health or decreased ability to move (obesity, arthritis, injury) will lose dominance.
 - Protect a sick or immobile pet w/ separation.
 - Monitor all interactions.
 - Separate all resources.
- ♥ Anxiety: Fear aggression is more common than pure "meanness". Often, dogs respond to fear with growling, biting, or redirection. They overthink situations and anticipate potential pain or discomfort and this leads to premature reaction.
 - Use pheromone collars and diffusers, anti-anxiety medications, and desensitization training to reduce anxiety.
 - Eliminate stressors and triggers as much as possible.
 - Create a calm environment with strict routine so the pet knows what to expect.
- ♥ Boredom: If dogs lack mental stimulation, they will often become aggressive, destructive, or obsessive.
 - Provide puzzle toys, increase play and interaction, train them to do tricks.
 - Take them for long walks in new areas.
 - Take them to family or daycare to let them play in a new area or with new pets (if they are able to interact with other pets).

- ♥ Lack of exercise: If dogs are not allowed proper amount of exercise they will have “pent up” energy which is often redirected or causes aggressive, destructive, or obsessive behaviors.
 - Run, walk, fetch!
 - Ask a neighbor or local runner to take a run with your dog.
 - Use a self-loading fetch toy.
 - Increase their outside space if possible.
 - Take them to family or daycare to let them play in a bigger area or with other pets (if they are able to interact with other pets).

Triggers

- ♥ Resources: Dogs often feel the need to protect or compete for food, toys, sleeping spots, potty areas, favorite humans, or other pets.
 - Each pet should have their own food and water bowl in areas where they cannot see each other.
 - Each pet should have their own sleeping/relaxing area where they cannot see each other.
 - Each pet may need to be let outside by themselves.
 - Do not kennel pets together unless they are bonded.
- ♥ Stress: Visitors, sounds, smells, lack of exercise, lack of sleeping/relaxing/hiding areas, etc. Sometimes, we don’t realize what might be causing stress (something we cannot hear, smell, sense).
 - Kennel/crate train to give them a safe quite space when there are visitors, construction/remodel, etc.
 - Keep all pet areas very clean -pick up poop daily, wash blankets weekly, vacuum/sweep daily, wash food bowls weekly, replace toys, etc.
 - Observe your pet’s body language closely to try to identify stressors.
- ♥ New pets/Too many pets: Groups of pets constantly compete for resources and fight for dominance. New pets often seriously upset the social hierarchy and overall add a huge amount of stress to a group of animals. The larger the group, the larger the stress.
 - DO NOT add a new pet into a group of pets that is already stressed or aggressive.
 - Be very careful if you decide to add a new pet -try multiple meet and greet sessions on leash in a neutral territory. Slowly increase interactions until you are certain they get along. Consider all previous recommendations for triggers, stressors, etc.
 - Occasionally it is necessary to re-home a pet that does not do well with other pets. This is only recommended if all previous recommendations have failed.

Redirection

Redirected aggression happens when a pet is very energetic, excited, fearful, or anxious in a specific situation and turns to the closest living being and attacks it. This is typically another dog that is also excited. They are fighting and have no idea why. Separate the pets by grasping the hips and quickly walking backward away from the other pet (another person must do the same to other pet at the same time). If this occurs regularly, be careful to prevent the situation or separate them during the situation.

Body Language

- ♥ Eyes: Tightened eyelids, dilated pupils, rolled eyes.

- ♥ Lips: Tightened lips, grimace, snarl.
- ♥ Ears: Stiff or flattened ears.
- ♥ Muscle Tension: Typically noted in the neck and shoulders.
- ♥ Posture/Position: Head up and focused, pulling against restraint, posed to sprint/lunge.
- ♥ Tail Set: Stiff alert tail, stiff wag.
- ♥ Vocalization: Moaning, growling, whining.
- ♥ Yawning and licking lips.

Training

It is always a great idea to consult a trainer when you have more than one dog. Choose a trainer you are comfortable with and who treats your pet the way you would treat them. You should never feel uncomfortable about how a trainer handles your pet.

Each pet should have a good foundation of basic commands like sit, stay, down, leave it. This creates a strong line of communication and understanding between you and your pet.

Veterinary Behavioral Specialist

Veterinarians do not receive behavior training/education in school. We learn as we practice and we study a lot after we graduate. We can usually offer basic recommendations and try a few different types of medications. Dangerous, quickly progressing, non-responsive or otherwise difficult cases should be seen by a specialist.

