

How to Deal With it When Dogs Get in Fights

February is a month when we celebrate love, but what should we do when the love is lost between our canine companions? In their lifetime almost every dog will be involved in a dog fight or some sort of aggressive altercation. The chances increase for dogs in multi-dog households, who go to dog parks, or are in situations where they routinely interact with new dogs (such as those who live in homes that foster multiple dogs, or go to doggy daycares that aren't well managed).

In the majority of cases, while dog fights look and sound serious, they are usually a minor event. They ferociously growl and violently thrash around, and then stop fighting on their own after about ten seconds, going their separate ways. There are no injuries; no one even has slobber on them. These are typically situations where there is a disagreement over pack status or an item or resource both dogs

the Canine Coach

by Valerie Broadway



want. The short fight worked out the issue and the dogs are over it and move on with life.

When fights cause injury or happen often, it is an indication that at least one of the dogs involved has deeper issues. Aggression that seems over the top for the situation is typically rooted in fear. Often, these dogs have had something traumatic happen in their past that left them feeling insecure and vulnerable.

Dog-to-dog aggression is one of the most common issues I get requests help with. Thankfully, these cases are almost always fixable. It is actually easier to help a dog-aggressive dog than a human-aggressive dog. The keys to helping a dog change are to 1) build a relationship of trust and respect between the dog and owner, 2) give clear behavioral boundaries of acceptable behavior, and 3) reduce the dog's level of anxiety.

Until dogs are listening to the humans they should be leashed at all times. This way every move is controlled and corrections are given instantly, as needed. Use the leash to quickly remove the dogs from situations where early signs of aggression are brewing. For most dogs hard staring is the first sign. More than three seconds of hard staring is the beginning of negative thoughts. Dogs should be on a leash

until the humans have complete verbal control, and only then do dogs they earn their freedom. Having a dog's respect can be all it takes to prevent fights.

People sometimes panic when a serious dog fight breaks out. In most cases standing there and screaming is not going to help. Already having a plan in mind allows for quick action to end the aggression and minimize injury. The steps mentioned below are for very intense, hard-core dog fights. This is one of the rare occasions when a person may have to hit a dog. The goal is to prevent the dogs from inflicting serious injury to one another. This is accomplished by ending the combat in a matter of seconds.

In homes where intense dog fights are a possibility, keep tools for ending fights handy, both inside and out. Sturdy walking sticks or something like scrap pieces of 1" x 1" lumber at least 18" long placed in strategic locations may be a lifesaver when needed. (For emergencies, a stick at least the circumference of your thumb from off the ground is better than nothing.)

When a serious fight breaks out between dogs in the same home, and they don't have leashes on and are not responding to the owner verbally, take the following steps:

Use a stick and strike the aggressor in the rib area. Most times it only takes one to three strikes to stop the attack. If the rib strike isn't working then strike the muzzle area. If you have to strike the muzzle it is an indication of extreme aggression.

If the stick isn't working, grab the aggressor by the collar behind the dog's head and hold on. Wait for the dog to try to get a better hold of the other dog, and as soon as their mouth opens pull the dog back and away.

In situations where the dogs are in a death fight you may have to hold the back of the collar while hitting the dog in the muzzle with the stick. Most fights aren't going to be this intense, but if you have to go to this level to stop it then you are dealing with dogs that most likely should be permanently separated.

If it is an attack of a large dog with a small

dog in its mouth, the focus should be on keeping the large dog from shaking its head. Straddle the dog from behind and hold both sides of its head to keep it from moving. A second person will need to work from the front to get the small dog out of the large dog's mouth.

When walking a dog on leash and a loose dog approaches aggressively take the following steps:

Position your dog behind you. This tells your dog that you are going to handle things. It also blocks eye contact between the dogs. (Dogs calm quicker when the visual is obstructed.)

Stand wide holding a 4' - 5' long stick vertically to the ground out to your side. This makes you look twice as wide. Stare at the dog and using your deepest, meanest voice, loudly tell the dog to "Get out of here!" Most dogs think this is more than they bargained for, and will leave you alone.

Should the dog continue to approach, when it is close enough, poke it hard in the shoulder area with the end of the stick, while using your mean voice again. The stick becomes an extension of your arm. Dogs can't believe you can touch them from that distance. It confuses them enough to snap them out of attack mode and retreat.

Should the dog continue to come in and attack your dog, use the stick as a weapon and hit the dog in the rib area a few times and follow the steps from the above instructions.

Every aggressive scenario can't be covered in this one column, and there are many ways to break up less intense dog fights. I deal with extremely aggressive dogs, often by myself, all the time. On the rare occasion when I have to physically break up a fight it is over in seconds with nobody injured. Having a plan in place gives everyone peace of mind and a safer environment to live in. However, helping dogs by providing proper management, leadership, and socializing are keys to a long-term, peaceful coexistence.

Valerie Broadway, the Canine Coach, is a dog trainer and behavioral specialist. For more information, call 919-542-4726 or visit www.caninecoachingservices.com.



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