

Fighting Between Family Dogs
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Holmes and Bain have just returned from the veterinarian. Both have stitches and puncture wounds from fighting with each other. After living together peaceably for a little over a year, Holmes attacked Bain in the backyard. The dogs still seem tense with each other, although they can be together without fighting. The dogs owners' are now worried that Holmes and Bain cannot now be trusted around children.

Fighting among dogs in the same family is a relatively common problem. Traditional wisdom holds that these problems stem from one dog trying to be 'alpha' or dominate the other. While instability in the dogs' social hierarchy is sometimes a cause for fighting, more often dominance is not the issue.

A social hierarchy serves to regulate which dog can have priority access to resources such as toys, food, favorite resting places and attention from the owner. The subordinate dog in the relationship tends to acquiesce to the other, and uses social signals such as looking away or avoiding the other dog in order to appear non-threatening. In many relationships however, there is not a 'dominant' dog and a 'subordinate' dog. Roles can change based on the context and the individuals involved. One dog may be able to control the tennis ball, but the other always comes through the door first.

In many of our consulting cases, one dog is clearly giving into the other dog but is still being attacked. The attacking dog almost seems to be 'bullying' the other by following her around and instigating a fight even there is no direct competition between the dogs.

In other cases, fights seem to happen in high arousal situations such as greetings, although a stable hierarchy seems to exist. Sometimes rough and tumble play can escalate into a fight.

Occasionally problems are triggered when one dog returns to the home after an absence, such as a trip to the groomer or veterinarian. In a few cases, the aggressor dog seems to be using the other as a scapegoat, and will attack whenever he is frustrated about something. In most cases, the injuries, if any, are minor; but infrequently one or both dogs are injured, sometimes severely.

Fighting dog cases can be resolved more often than not. But because the dynamics of the problems are so varied, there is no one-size fits all solution. These problems do not mean that the dogs are becoming generally aggressive and will now be a threat to people. Many dogs who fight with each other are very friendly toward people and remain so, despite their behavior toward each other.

If your dogs are fighting you must first manage their environment to prevent the fights. This may mean keeping them separated some, or all of the time, until you can seek professional help. Muzzling them and letting them 'fight it out' is dangerous and should not be done. Do not try to pull the dogs apart by their collars, as this usually results in more injuries to the dogs and also to you. We recommend **Direct Stop**, a citronella spray as a safe way to stop a fight, and contacting a certified behaviorist to help you.

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