

Why Dogs Don't Share
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Recently, Jenna called us because her two dogs Sam and Tucker were fighting. The dogs were fighting over toys and food. Jenna couldn't understand why the dogs couldn't get along. She always put out enough food for both dogs and there were always two of every kind of toy for the dogs. Jenna tried hard to treat both dogs equally, making sure that they got equal access to food, treats, attention from her, play time and walks. If she did one thing for one dog she made sure that she did the same for the other. She was also intolerant of one dog taking things from the other. Tucker would frequently try to move Sam away from his food dish and would try to take toys from him. Jenna would reprimand Tucker and then give back the stolen goods. Oddly, this did not help but rather things got worse and in fact several fights occurred when Jenna tried to give things back to Sam. What's going on here? Are Jenna's dogs deranged?

No, probably not. Fighting between dogs is not common and is certainly not to be tolerated. Serious injury can occur to the dogs or to people who get caught in the fights. However, Jenna has unrealistic expectations from her dogs and in fact may be making the fighting worse. The bottom line is that most dogs don't know how to share and are not interested in equality. When dogs live together, they almost always organize themselves into a dominance hierarchy, with a top dog or alpha, a second ranking dog or beta, and if more dogs are living together, other ranks. Dominance rank determines who gets first access to the goodies in life as defined by the dogs. Food, treats, toys, attention from others and mates are the most common things valued and contested by dogs.

Dominance is established by threats and aggression, but once the dogs have worked it out, they divide up things with no fighting and very little threats and posturing because the submissive dogs learn to give way to the more dominant ones. Dogs are predisposed to live this way and subordinate dogs usually don't suffer because they still get access to things, they just have to wait their turns to get it. When owners like Jenna try to enforce equality among the dogs it can destabilize their relationships and can make fighting more likely as the dominant dogs try to reinforce their positions.

For most dog owners, the best advice is to let the dogs work out their own relationships and to interfere as little as possible. Dogs aren't people and they shouldn't be expected to live by human values. Certainly, dogs should never be allowed to fight, and if fighting does develop, owners should seek professional help from their veterinarian or an animal behaviorist.