

Behavior Problems Notes from Tarheel Canine Sibling Rivalry: Strategies to Reduce Squabbles

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Sibling rivalry, or fighting amongst dogs inside the same household, usually stems from either normal competitiveness amongst dogs of similar age, sex, and development, or adolescent dominance struggles, or both.

Fights among siblings can sometimes seem severe, with blood drawn, etc. However when the animals are close in age and similar in temperament (i.e. not willing to give in) these fights can go on and on, making the owner's nerves wear thin. However, if no serious damage is being done, interference can actually make the problem worse, especially if that interference favors one of the dogs involved. These struggles are best allowed to work themselves out.

NOTE: SOLID FORMAL OBEDIENCE TRAINING IS A PREREQUISITE TO DEAL WITH THIS ISSUE SUCCESSFULLY.

However if the fighting is constant, use obedience to enforce time-outs:

1. At the start of the fight, use a startle to get the dogs attention, then under obedience take the combatants to separate places and enforce long stays, up to a half hour or more. This will teach the dogs that fighting results in long boring stays.
2. When the dogs are calm, allow them to be released with the OK command. If another fight ensues, use the same strategy, startle, then stays again.
3. Above all, if a battle ensues, stay calm, do not yell and get hysterical, that is not the sign of a leader.
4. Do not assert dominance physically by rolling them over, use obedience, long stays, to assert your control. Physical dominance like rolling only makes the dog want to challenge you more, not less.

Competitiveness among siblings can make the dominance fights more frequent and more severe. Dogs, like us, compete for scarce resources, but also will compete for resources the other dog possesses (dominance related, called ritual displays of dominance – taking away possessions from another pack member). This means you can have 40 rawhide bones around, and the brother wants the one the sister has. For to take it away, signifies higher pack position. This complicates life tremendously, because it means anytime you play with them they will compete for toys.

Strategies:

1. Implement the No Free Lunch program with both dogs. No free affection for which the dogs can compete, over-use your obedience, regiment their lives for a while to assert your position. Do not allow yourself to become a possession they can fight over.
2. Remove all toys from common areas, especially no Rawhides or real bones.
3. Use obedience for exercise and stimulation. Play with each dog separately. Put one in a sit stay, or down stay, and enforce it while you work with the other dog. This is best accomplished by back-tying the one to a post or fence to ensure he holds his position.
4. Then switch the dogs and continue.
5. Feeding. Feed separately at first, then use lots of obedience when you re-attempt to feed them in the same room. Use stay before releasing them to eat, etc. Do not allow them to go to each others bowls, if they try, reprimand and lead them back to theirs. Keep leashes attached if necessary.
6. If there is food aggression toward you, consult a trainer.

This is a complex problem. In general, you must exercise the dickens out of them. The more tired the less they will fight. 20 minutes of aerobic exercise a day. Also a low protein food is recommended, no need to feed jet fuel! Train them, then use the training to enforce your will.

If you do have to break up a squabble, always support the presumed dominant dog. If you, as most people do, feel "sorry" for the underdog and intervene on his behalf, you are going against the social structure dogs understand. You must always support the dominant dog. There is no Morality in what they do, and supporting the pack order leads to clear understanding of who is in charge. Supporting the lower ranking dog will only increase the fighting, and also increase it when you are not around.