



Avoiding Canine Confrontations

Normal puppies see other dogs as other puppies - and are sometimes overwhelmingly friendly. However, when they become adults, other dogs are seen as interesting or threatening, depending on your dog's temperament and early experience. There are no guarantees that your dog will like all other dogs' any more than you like all other humans. However, it is in the dogs best interest (for survival of the species) to either avoid confrontation or - at worst - to avoid injury in case of a confrontation.

Dogs have developed extensive body language to help communicate their intent BEFORE any drastic action is taken. When we as guardians tighten the leash and join the action, we often do so prematurely - before the whole canine conversation has taken place. Normally, just letting them complete their ritual before tightening the leash is enough to allow one of the dogs to retire gracefully.

In addition, most (certainly not all) dog fights are noisy, frightening, and end with minor injuries or no injuries at all...if the dogs are left to themselves. My normal advice to guardians with dogs that begin to fight is to drop both leashes, step away from the dogs, and command the dogs to stop it. Of course, for this to have any effect, the dogs have to respect your demand! So, here are a few ways to help your dog respect you...and avoid fights.

What to do when training your dog:

Lower the rank of the dog(s) in your family (pack). There are lots of ways to do this, including not letting your dog on furniture or beds, making them wait at doors and for food, and not letting them win at tug-of war. Get the dog addicted to or at least interested in a pleasant distraction - ball, food, Frisbee. Play with or use that object while walking your dog with no other dogs there. Once the dog is very interested in that, use it as a distraction when other dogs are around. Use counter-conditioning by offering a treat immediately before your dog is focused on another dog, then immediately after you pass him, her or them. Make sure your dog watches you more than you watch him or her. This is part of the pack structure, but often neglected. Strategies include hiding from the dog in unfamiliar places, playing hide and seek in your house and outside in your yard, teaching "Find It". Make it a habit to walk your dog on a loose leash - or off-leash if that's a possibility. This gives the dog a reason to watch you (see above) and gives the dog more choices should a confrontation arise. If the dog is on a tight leash, it

has no option - if confronted, it must fight. After a while, the dog begins to expect to have to fight.

What to do when a problem develops:

If your dog and another dog approach each other both dogs should be on equal footing. If your dog is on leash, and the other off, drop your leash...if yours is off and the other on, snap the leash on your dog. If both are off, guardians should abandon the dogs as much as possible. Try saying "Let's go", and walking away....throw the ball or whatever...**but move away**. Act as though there are no problems - aggression is usually caused by fear, and guardians can increase the fear exponentially. If the pack leader is afraid, certainly the members will be. Again, if a fight actually develops, command the dogs to stop, **"No, Bad Dogs"**, or some such phrase. If you have to interfere, don't put your hand near their heads - it may well get bitten. Preferably use an object - branch, purse, whatever - to interrupt the action. Your interference in a dog fight will most likely lead to far greater injury to you AND the dogs than your non-involvement. This is very difficult to believe, but it's true. At dog parks, remember that the dogs that are already there when you arrive have already formed a loose pack. They may aggressively approach your dog. Use wisdom when entering...and don't, if it looks too threatening. Predatory aggression is completely different from other kinds - and small dogs are often the targets. A predatory dog will stare at a small dog, then stalk and attack. In this case, you should interfere immediately. The best way is to interrupt the attack, and thus the dog's concentration. Throw something past the dog's face, yell, or run quickly, drawing the dog's attention.

If your dog tends to approach other dogs in a dominant aggressive manner - on tiptoe, head thrust forward, eyes making unblinking contact - you need to establish a noise for negative reinforcement.

Find a sound that you can use as negative reinforcement. This can be a chain, a horn, whistle, etc. It should not be something you use on a regular basis (one behaviorist suggests a duck call!). Now, pattern the dog to immediately stop what he's doing when he hears that sound. The best way to do this is to teach him "wait" or "don't touch" using that sound. Take him to a doorway, and as he barges through, make the noise and close the door in his face (gently!). Do it again....and again. Within a few minutes, the dog will look at you before he begins to walk through the door. Now, place a treat on the floor. When the dog reaches for it, make your noise, and pick the treat up. Repeat that a few times. The dog should stop going for the treat, instead looking at you curiously. Leave the treat on the floor and make sure he knows it isn't his. Finally, when you're sure he understands that the ground belongs to you, give him the treat from your hand. These techniques can be reversed, if you wish.

You have just generalized a specific behavior by making it work in more than one spot. Now do it for another behavior that you consider a problem. Jumping up is

a trait most people don't appreciate ... and normally can be modified quickly with a sound interrupter.

Once your dog knows what the noise means, you can use it on major behavior problems like aggression. It is NOT a cure-all, but a tool, and should be used before your dog's attention is completely engaged by another dog. If used properly, the noise interrupter will distract your dog long enough for you to regain control by telling the dog come, sit or down...and offering a food reward, if that has been your habit.

This method improves with time. Of course, it will do nothing to stop another dog from attacking yours. In most cases, however, it takes two dogs to make a fight. If one backs down or becomes interested in something else, the fight doesn't happen.

There are also cases where one dog is literally jumped by another. Again, without getting physically involved, command both dogs to stop. Be angry and powerful....the alpha doesn't allow this sort of thing! Don't scream or flail about. Those are signs of weakness.

Despite all our efforts, some dogs will fight. If your dog has been in more than one fight consider seeking professional help.

The Marin Humane Society, Animal Behavior & Training, T. King, February, 1995