Overcoming Dog-on-Dog Aggression

BY MICHAEL WOMBACHER

Canine sibling rivalry—two dogs not getting along in the same household—is one of the most difficult to resolve dog-on-dog aggression issues. I found this out early on in my training career when, 16 years ago, I walked into a client's home to be greeted by a bloodbath. The minute I walked in, the two Australian Shepherds who were greeting me turned on each other with a vengeance, and nearly killed each other.

Since then I have discovered that, at best, the chances of turning this behavior around—if it is severe—are 50/50. The worst cases of sibling rivalry occur between spayed females who, given the right circumstances, will kill each other. That said, let us turn our attention to how to approach the resolution of this issue and end up on the positive side of the 50/50 equation.

If you are experiencing this issue, there are a number of things that need to be implemented simultaneously. First, you need to establish your role as leader in the social structure. That involves implementing what is commonly called a "rank management" program and includes such things as demanding a command from the dogs for each interaction you have with them (learn to earn); spending significant amounts of time ignoring them and then, only in exchange for commands, giving them structured attention; generally maintaining a high level of obedience; eliminating furniture rights; teaching the dogs self-control at the front door and a number of other items. Becoming "pack leader" in this fashion is the absolute foundation of having the slightest prayer of reliably resolving this kind of aggression because you, as the pack leader, have the right to control conflict in the group—something dogs innately understand.

As you are implementing this you also need to determine which of the two dogs is more naturally the dominant one over the other. This can be difficult, as the dogs might display dominant or submissive behaviors differently in varying situations. However, there are a few things to look for: In the fights, who usually comes out the winner? Does one dog often prevent the other from entering or leaving a room? Does one dog routinely steal the other dog's toys, food, etc.? Does one dog move out of the way for the other dog?

Once you have determined the right pecking order it is absolutely crucial that you treat the more dominant dog preferentially in such a way that both dogs know it. That means that dog gets the first petting, the first food or treats, is the first out the door, and so on. It doesn't mean that you ignore the other dog, just that the top dog gets preference. This can be very difficult since we often prefer the "underdog" for a variety of reasons. However, treating the underdog preferentially will only perpetuate the problem—I guarantee it.

Once this is accomplished you want to begin to reprimand the lower-ranking dog for any dominant overtures toward the higher-ranking dog. That is, you, the pack leader, are supporting the natural relationship between the dogs. Similarly, should the dominant dog make excessive, bullying overtures toward the lower-ranking dog, he or she should be reprimanded also. Remember, you, as the pack leader, have the right to control conflict in the group.

Now, this is a bare-bones outline and there is more to it, as this is an incredibly complex issue, but that is the foundation for building a mutually respectful relationship between dogs. However, that said, we must consider the general environment within which the dogs will be living once we start implementing this. What I have found over the years is that committed owners can arrange the social environment in such a way that conflict is minimized or even eliminated. However, often the general atmosphere in the house is little better than a political détente with a constant, generalized sense tension in the background. The dogs are tolerating each other but that's it.

In that case, I often encourage owners to consider re-homing one of the dogs for everyone's benefit. The background tension of the constant threat of violence is an enormous, ongoing source of stress both for the dogs and the owners. No one is truly happy. In such cases both dogs are tremendously relieved to be free of each other. The only one with an emotional price to pay is usually and understandably the owners. In such cases, we truly have to consider the best for everyone and pay the emotional price, if necessary.

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