



## Interdog Aggression and Pack Order Problems

“They used to love each other, what happened?” Dog owners often ask this question when seeking help with a pack order problem. Anytime that dogs live together they form a pack based on a dominance hierarchy. If the members of the pack respect the pack order, it preserves the order of dominance, reduces conflict and promotes cooperation between pack members.

When conflicts arise between pack members, a pack hierarchy becomes unstable. This happens when the social position of one or more dogs in the pack becomes unclear or subject to challenge. Dogs involved in the conflict may start snarling, growling or snapping at each other.

This initial conflict often escalates into serious confrontations that may result in injury or death to one or more dogs. The potential also exists for a dog or dogs to attack or bite its owners (redirected aggression) as he or she attempts to break up a fight.

Dogs have a complex social system that most owners do not know about or understand. If you are having pack order problems, you should seek assistance from a behaviorist who can observe, interpret and provide suggestions that will help you reinforce pack order.

Common things that may cause pack order problems:

- ⌘ An immature subordinate dog reaches social maturity (can happen anywhere between 10 and 24 months of age).
- ⌘ Owner interference with the dominant dog's right to control items (food, toys, beds, attention) in its environment by preferential treatment to a subordinate dog(s).
- ⌘ Natural progression in leadership, i.e., a dominant dog has aged and can no longer maintain its dominant status.
- ⌘ Owner interference that prevents dogs from showing signals and ritualized behaviors that establish and maintain pack order or dominance.
- ⌘ Owner believes he or she can dictate pack order to the pack and chooses the animal that was “here first” or the/she wants to be boss, like the “oldest” dog.
- ⌘ Owner introduces a new dog or dogs into the pack/home.
- ⌘ The loss of a pack member due to death or placement in another home. Or, reintroducing a pack member that has been absent from the pack for a while.
- ⌘ Treating both (or all) dogs the same or equally. No pack exists based on democratic principles! If you do not enforce the pack order, and that means support the dominant dog's position, problems will generally arise at some point.

It is critical that you understand that, as owner, you do not get to choose which dog is dominant. Your dogs establish their pack order between themselves. Most attempts by owners to interfere in disputes causes increased conflict. Your dogs must decide who ranks where in the dominance hierarchy themselves and because of their interactions with each other.

Many factors determine a particular dog's standing in the pack, for instance:

(a) Individual personality - Some dogs are dominant and some submissive. A dog that might normally not be the dominant dog may “force” itself into the dominant position by force of will.

- (b) Size - Size matters because a larger, more powerful dog, can enforce its position by its overwhelming power.
- (c) Breed - Breed or mix may matter as one breed/mix may have a more dominant personality than another.
- (d) Sex - with the male usually dominant over the females, everything else being equal.

Often, deciding which dog is the dominant dog is easy. It is the dog that demands food, attention, or to go through the door first. Yet, dominance rankings can vary depending on context. For example, one dog may want to control access to food, possessions, and yet another territory (resting/sleeping areas or proximity to its owner). What is even more confusing is that pack order can change over time! You, as owner, must stay vigilant so as not to miss any of the sometimes subtle signals of changing pack order.

Dogs establish pack order through a variety of ritualized behaviors. These behaviors include, but are not limited to, body posturing (staring, showing teeth and carrying the tail high [dominant] or low [submissive]), or through vocalizations (growling, snarling or barking). Sometimes a dominant dog will "stand over" or "mount" a subordinate dog by placing its legs or neck over the shoulders or rear of the submissive dog.

However, dogs may have other "issues," that contribute to their pack order problems. They may have had unpleasant experiences with other dogs in the past or inadequate socialization during early socialization periods.

Often, dogs who have gotten along famously, may, with no warning, escalate dominance displays and move right into aggression.

What can you do to resolve pack order problems? Our suggestions are:

- (1) Neuter intact males.
- (2) Determine, through observation, what the "normal" pack order is in your pack. Again, this is what it is naturally and not what you want it to be.
- (3) Support the natural pack order. Do not undermine pack order by treating your dogs equally or by preventing the dominant dog from asserting his position. The dominant dog in your pack can, and should, be allowed to take toys away from subordinate dogs, push in to get attention from you, control territory like favorite sleeping areas or proximity to you, and toys or other resources (from the dogs' point of view). Support your dominant dog's status not only by allowing this to occur but by getting on the subordinate dog yourself if it attempts to "break rank."
- (4) Be a leader. Assume your natural right as owner to rule the pack and make sure that all the other humans in your home also occupy the top rungs of power in the pack order. There are two very effective ways to accomplish this, one is for each member of the family to periodically hand feed the dogs for a week, the other is to practice the "Nothing is Free" philosophy. The realization, on your dogs' part, that they occupy only the lowest positions in the home hierarchy will help them sort out and accept their lower positions in the pecking order.
- (5) Never attempt to break up dog fights by your physical intervention! If necessary, squirt the dogs directly in the face with a hose (if outdoors) or squirt them with a vinegar/water mixture from a squirt bottle (if indoors).
- (6) Reward non-aggression and use counter conditioning and desensitization programs to reduce reactivity.
- (7) Seek professional help.

#### WARNINGS:

Should you fail to respond appropriately, you run the risk of making the problem worse and risking injury or death to yourself, your dogs or both.

Using punishment in an attempt to correct pack order problems can make the situation worse, avoid it.