Canine Rivalry

What is Canine Rivalry?

Canine rivalry refers to repeated conflicts between dogs living in the same household. Animals that live in groups, like dogs, establish relationships through which the individuals involved interact and live together. The roles that the individuals play within the relationship can change with each new day or situation and can be affected by the presence of various resources, such as food, toys, and attention from people. Dogs may warn each other initially by snarling, growling, or snapping, but not causing injury. However, the conflict may sometimes intensify into prolonged bouts of dangerous fighting, which may result in one or more dogs being injured.

Getting Professional Help

Ongoing canine rivalry is potentially dangerous. Dogs or human family members could be severely injured as a result of fighting. Because resolving rivalry problems requires the understanding of the ways in which dogs communicate, it's often necessary for owners to obtain assistance from a professional animal behaviorist (see our handout: "When the Behavior Helpline Can't Help"). Certified animal behaviorists are trained to observe, interpret, and modify animal behavior.

Why Conflict Occurs

Conflicts between household dogs develop for a wide variety of reasons.
Conflicts may occur if:
• A new animal has been introduced to the household.
• A resident animal has died or no longer lives in the house.
• A resident animal is re-introduced after an absence.
• A young dog reaches social maturity, which is usually between 10 months and 2 years of age.

Understanding canine relationships

• **How relationships are established:** Relationships are established through healthy communication, which puppies learn early on in life through socialization. However as a result of inadequate socialization, surgical alterations, or genetic tendencies, some dogs lack proper communication skills and may escalate into aggression with very little warning.

• **Your Role:** Do not attempt to influence or define the dogs' relationship by interfering in their interactions with each other or by favoring one dog over another. Rather, establish a strong, stable relationship with each dog individually by practicing "Nothing in Life is Free" (see our handout). Requiring a dog to work for everything it wants is a safe, non-confrontational way of reinforcing the positive ways a dog behaves in the relationship and provides the guidance that dogs need. If your relationship with your dogs is stable, it can help reduce any stress or feelings of instability that may be adding to the conflict between your dogs.

• **Breaking up a fight:** If you need to break up a fight, do so by making a loud noise to try and interrupt them. If loud noises do not work, then try squirting the dogs with water. Never attempt to break up a dog fight by grabbing the dogs by their collars or getting any part of yourself in between them. Touching dogs while they are fighting can result in what is called "redirected aggression," where a dog may bite you because he thinks you are part of the conflict. If you've had a dog fight, please call our behavior helpline at (303) 751-5772, Ext. 1359, or contact your veterinarian for a referral to a professional animal behaviorist.

What You Can Do To Help
• If the dogs involved are intact males or female, spay or neuter both dogs.
• Make sure that all the humans in your household are practicing "Nothing in Life is Free."
• With the help of a professional animal behaviorist, elicit and reinforce non-aggressive behaviors using counter-conditioning and desensitization techniques. These procedures must be designed and tailored to specifically meet the needs of each individual case and require professional in-home help.
• Punishment will not resolve the issue and can actually make it worse.
• You should be aware that if you respond to this type of problem inappropriately, you run the risk of intensifying the problem and potentially causing injury to yourself and/or your dogs. **or your pet.**