

Two or More Dogs

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One dog, one master: Everyone knows their place. One dog, one master with a family of "people": The people may not all know their place, but the dog knows he's last on the hierarchy ladder of his "pack" (your family). When you have two or more dogs everything becomes more interesting for every canine!

When two or more dogs are living in the same household they instinctively begin a "pack behavior." I will try to cover the basics here.

Why Conflict Occurs

Conflicts between household dogs usually develop when the ranking of each dog is not clear or is in contention. This may occur if:

- You attempt to treat both dogs equally, rather than supporting the dominant dog's position.
- You interrupt or interfere with the dominant dog's ability to control the preferred items (food, toys, beds, or attention) in his environment by giving preferential treatment to the subordinate dog(s).
- You prevent the dogs from expressing the signals and ritualized behaviors that establish dominance. (Eating first, controlling toys, controlling movement of subordinate dogs, ect.)
- A new animal has been introduced into the house.
- A resident animal has died or no longer lives in the house.
- A resident animal is re-introduced after an absence.
- A young, subordinate dog reaches social maturity (usually between ten months and two years of age).
- A dominant dog ages and cannot maintain his dominant status.

There is an "alpha" (top on the ladder) in every "pack." You or your spouse should be regarded as the true "alpha leader." But the interesting stuff is just beginning, because inside the "People + Dog pack" exists the "Dog Pack." The Dog Pack also consists of an "alpha" or "top-dog." Democracy does not exist in the doggie world, and many times well-meaning people can mess up the doggie hierarchy and create unwanted fights by trying to treat all dogs as equals.

It is believed that dogs do not care so much *where* they belong on the hierarchy ladder, just as long as they *know* where they belong. This straight belief becomes somewhat bent when dealing with very dominant dogs who obviously wish to be alpha, and very

insecure dogs who obviously will be submissive to anyone and anything they encounter. But still as a belief, it holds some weight; especially when trying to convince people that they need not feel "sorry" for the "omega" (bottom on the ladder) dog. **Problems will almost always occur when well-meaning people feel sorry for the omega dog and unknowingly begin treating it as an "alpha," and creating vicious jealousy and dog fights in the process.**

The first thing to do when you have two or more dogs is to figure out which one of your dogs is "alpha." The alpha dog usually displays the following characteristics:

- ALWAYS wins at tug-of-war with the other dogs.
- RECEIVES the most attention from the other dogs, sometimes not wanting the attention.
- RARELY or NEVER licks the other dogs on the mouth.
- Wins all STARING CONTESTS with the other dogs.
- May become JEALOUS when the other dogs receive attention from you.
- May STEAL or GUARD toys, chewiest, food, etc.
- Usually has FIRST CHOICE of the best sleeping areas.
- May push his way to be FIRST out and in doorways.
- May MOUNT the other dogs (male or female).

In contrast, the "omega" dog usually displays the following characteristics:

- ALWAYS gives up first at tug-of-war with the other dogs.
- GIVES the most attention and affection to the other dogs, usually licking their mouths, especially the "alpha" dog's mouth.
- LOOKS AWAY when being stared at by the other dogs, and probably by you too.
- Freely GIVES UP toys, chewies, food, sleeping areas, etc. to the other dogs.
- Rolls on back and displays "BELLY" to other dogs, and probably to you too.
- May pee upon greeting the other dogs, and possibly people too.
- **In most situations the alpha and omega are the easiest positions to determine,** and if you only have two dogs, the determination is usually much easier to make! With more than two dogs you can run into dogs trading omega positions depending on the day. You can also have a "close second" alpha dog that is either the "Alpha Female" to the true top dog: the "Alpha Male;" or the "Beta" who is a dominant dog, yet still second to the "Alpha." This wonderful web of personalities

will need to be explained in another article (it can get pretty complicated!) For more information read the Three or More Dogs article.

Back to basics; Once you've determined where everyone stands on the hierarchy ladder, it is your responsibility to *reassure them constantly* and make them *feel secure in their positions*. If an alpha dog does not feel secure in his position as alpha, he will usually exaggerate his position to reassure himself. Exaggerating dominance (i.e., alpha) = aggression. This can be a problem at best, and deadly at worst. Therefore, here are some suggestions on how to reassure your dogs.

The alpha dog gets everything FIRST. He gets petted first, his food bowl put on the ground first, fed treats first, allowed outside and inside first, etc.

The alpha dog also gets FIRST CHOICE of everything. He gets first choice of toys, chewies, sleeping areas, etc. This can be tricky. Although he gets first choice (because you respect his alpha position), he is not allowed to change his mind and STEAL toys, etc. by staring, growling, pouncing, or attacking. It is your responsibility that you do not allow him to be a "bully." He may be allowed to "guard" his chosen toy as long as he isn't growling at the other dogs clear across the room, not letting them pass through door openings, hoarding all the toys and guarding them, etc. If he begins this behavior, take his guarded object(s) away, put it out of sight, and sneak it into the dogs' "toy box" for someone to find at a later date.

One of the best ways I've found to reassure pack position, especially when there is a new furry arrival, is to give the dogs' food treats in pack order. For the sake of simplicity, let's say the alpha dog's name is "ROVER" and the omega dog's name is "FIDO."

Instruct all the dogs to sit. Then, say "Rover's Treat!" and give a food treat to Rover. Then say "Fido's Treat!" and give a food treat to Fido. This exercise alone spells out very clearly where everyone stands on the hierarchy ladder and also confirms they are both at the bottom of the "People + Dog Pack" because YOU are giving the food.

While you are doing the above suggestions it is important that you do not unwittingly encourage aggression in the alpha dog. This sometimes happens because people are under the false impression that they are supposed to lavish the alpha dog with attention, while almost ignoring the omega dog. If this happens, the omega dog may have a difficult time gaining confidence in herself because she is rarely praised for anything. And to make matters worse, the alpha dog may believe that your *true desire* is to ignore the omega dog and give *him* (the alpha dog) attention. Therefore, he believes he is *servicing* you by growling and showing aggression toward the omega dog.

This situation can be difficult and usually occurs when introducing a new dog into the pack. Although the alpha dog may get more attention, do not lavish attention on him while purposely ignoring the omega dog. At the same time, you need to try to sneak in as much attention toward that omega dog as possible! Don't lock the alpha in another room to give the omega attention, rather, give the alpha a "job" to do, so he is servicing you and pleasing you. Play fetch with him while you pet the omega dog (easier said than done, but possible), put him in a down stay while you groom the omega dog (after you groomed

him first, of course). When you're done grooming, *release them both at the same time*, then **PRAISE the alpha first**, then the omega. **Do not praise the omega less, just last.**

Avoid "holding" one dog. Whenever a dog is on a lap, or within a "hug" (especially if the dog is *physically higher* than the other, i.e. on a chair, couch, or in your arms), they may become territorially protective of *you the territory*. If you *must* hold a dog, try to hold the alpha first to appease him, then put him in a down stay while you hold the omega. Release at the same time and praise the alpha first, then the omega. I have personally found that praising with food treats can be beneficial if you have a food-oriented alpha and you give the treats a (physical) distance apart from one another. If the dogs are commanded to "sit" before given a food treat every time before they are given a food treat, they should stay in the "sit" apart from one another until they are both done eating and you release them. This will inhibit any desire for the alpha dog to attack the omega for the food treat. If you have an omega dog that needs some confidence bolstering, read the article: "Building Confidence in a Shy or an Omega Dog."

If your alpha dog is not reliable in a "sit," "down," "stay," and "settle" this would be an excellent time to take him to (or back to) obedience class. Take each of your dogs to doggie class on separate nights. This is the best opportunity for you to have quality time with each individual dog and probably one of the only times you will ever have to do so!

The Importance of Being Dominant

One of the most important ways you can keep the peace is to discern the dominance dynamic that will establish itself and work to reinforce it. In every canine pack, even those who live with humans, there is a hierarchy from alpha dog (the dominant, number one dog) on down.

It will be the job of the human family members to support this canine hierarchy. Problems arise when people feel badly for the more submissive dog(s) and try to make things fairer by giving extra attention or even scolding the dominant dog for showing dominant behavior. This creates an unfortunate situation where the dominant dog feels that they must constantly reassert themselves because the humans just aren't understanding the fact that they are top dog!

To avoid fights, you must *reinforce*, not break down, this dominance hierarchy. Make sure that the most dominant dog is first -- first to be greeted, first to be fed, first to be let outside, etc. Then follow down the line. Once your dogs know that everyone in the pack understands the hierarchy, they won't feel the need to assert their dominance through fighting and everyone will be happier.

In some cases, the more submissive dog continues to try and usurp "dominant dog privileges". It will be up to you as pack leader to correct that behavior so the dominant dog won't have to.

The Home Stretch

Remember, the transition period may last several weeks, a month, or longer. The time will vary depending upon the individual dogs involved. You will have to be patient and understanding during what will be a stressful time for your current dog(s) and the new

addition. With the proper introductions, reinforcements and reassurances, this transitional period should soon be over and your new addition will be an accepted part of the family.

If the introduction of your new dog isn't proceeding well, contact professional animal behaviorist immediately. Resolving lingering aggression problems is crucial for the safety of your family -- not only the dogs who could be potentially injured during fights, but also the human members of the family who could be hurt attempting to stop aggressive outbreaks.