

# Sibling Rivalry Among Dogs

By Sherry Woodard

Sibling rivalry occurs when two or more dogs in the same household fight with each other. The beginning of these situations can often go unnoticed by the people in the house. Here are the signs to watch for: The dogs are giving each other looks and posturing; soon the dogs start to growl over space or other resources. If their behavior is ignored, they may seriously injure each other by fighting.



Fighting occurs in some dog groupings to establish a stable hierarchy. Among dogs, there is always a hierarchy in the pack (which includes other dogs and people in the household), with one dog dominant over the others. In the wild, having a hierarchy helps to keep order in the pack. Thankfully, in many homes, dominance is settled by one dog snarling a challenge and the other dog accepting a subordinate role.

If there is a dominance issue that hasn't been settled, people sometimes exacerbate the problem by trying to stop the dogs from establishing clear roles. Ignorant of the dogs' natural tendency to form a hierarchy, they support the perceived victim and verbally chastise the more dominant dog. Instead, they should be reinforcing the subordination of the one dog and the dominance of the other. Their well-meaning attempt to make the dogs equal is not helpful.

Here are some common situations when hierarchy may become an issue:

- When a new dog enters your family
- When one dog reaches social maturity
- When one dog becomes old in the eyes of the other
- When one dog's health is compromised

If your dogs start fighting, consult your veterinarian first – there may be a medical cause. Then, see a behavior specialist for help in learning to support the hierarchy between the dogs and for help in keeping the dogs and your human family safe. All dogs should have a healthy, respectful relationship with their human family. A firm voice command from you should be enough to stop a fight. If that's not the case, get professional help from an animal behaviorist or trainer.

*Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.*