

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Answer, not always! Dogs have a social structure in which each dog is either dominant (alpha, or pack leader) or subordinate in its relationship with each other pack member. This is known as dominance hierarchy. The leader or alpha dog is the one that has first access to all the critical resources, such as food, dog beds, territory and favored possessions. Declaration of dominance by the alpha dog is generally communicated through facial expressions, body posturing and actions. Confrontation or fighting is rare, since the subordinate submits to the alpha dog and the alpha gets his or her way, the subordinate gives up the challenge and wants to keep the peace.

Sibling Rivalry in the Home

Sibling rivalry refers to conflicts between dogs living in the same household. It arises between dogs when there is instability in the home. When the social position of each dog is not clear or is contentious, it is known as dominance hierarchy.

Typically, dogs establish their dominance hierarchies through a series of behaviors, including many different body postures and verbal communication. The status is based on the behavior and is established by the dogs, and not what you choose in your household. You cannot choose which dog will be "alpha." Dogs will establish this among themselves, and any attempt to interfere may result in increased sibling rivalry and possibly fighting. One important thing to remember: dogs are not human and do not follow our thought that "everyone is equal."

How Should I Interact with my Dogs?

If you are trying to treat two dogs as equals it is counter-productive and it serves against the natural order of the hierarchy. The dog that is the more dominant in a relationship needs to be supported in his position and the more subordinate must be taught to accept the relationship. If you support or encourage the subordinate dog as an equal, and he gains access to resources such as your attention, the dominant dog may challenge and start a fight in an effort to keep the lower ranking dog in his place. If you then discipline the dominant dog, or pull the dominant dog away, you have now shown preferential treatment toward the subordinate dog. This will not help the subordinate dog and it will prolong the dispute.

Dogs Have Their Own Rules to Live by

Respect and support whatever "dominance hierarchy" your dogs establish for themselves. This is difficult for most humans! We want our pets to be safe and we want life to be "fair";

what we do to make things equitable may actually cause more problems. Remember, dogs do not think like we do, they are pack animals.

- Do not undermine their hierarchy by attempting to treat the dogs equally and democratic, or by preventing the alpha dog from asserting his position.
- Do not protect the subordinate dog because he is younger or smaller.
- Always, without exception, the alpha dog gets the preferential treatment. He gets his food first, you pet him first, he goes into the car first, with him you play first and he is groomed first, etc.
- Alpha dogs must be allowed to take toys away from subordinate dogs, to push in to receive attention from the owner, to control favorite sleeping places, food and other valuable resources. Support the alpha dog's status by allowing this to occur.
- Do not stop the expressing of signals and ritualized behaviors that establish dominance, like snarling, growling or snapping. For us humans it looks and sounds worse than it is. They only do it to impress the other dog, to get it's respect.
- Never attempt to break up a fight between dogs.

These rules are valid in your house, in the park, at the beach, at the vet, basically everywhere. Whenever two dogs approach, open the leash let them sniff each other and try not to hinder their communication.

What Should I Do to Help Them Get Along?

Step 1:

First and foremost, be the ultimate leader in the household and regain control over both dogs. Your presence and commands should be sufficient to prevent and control all dominance challenges between dogs. Control of each dog is achieved through the use of verbal commands, by leaving a lead and head collar attached for immediate control and by controlling access to all rewards including food treats, toys and games.

- Toys should not be left in the dog's reach all the time. Put the toys away after you end playtime.
- Attention on demand not only encourages situations where one dog may challenge the other, but also allows your dogs to control you. If your dog nudges you and demands attention then he is in control. You call the dog over for attention when you decide; this will help avoid any situations or challenges for your attention.
- Use a head collar with lead control (such as a Gentle Leader or Halti)
- Use obedience-reward based training. Each dog should go through a class separately.
- Treatment should be designed to identify and support the dominant dog. In most cases this is the younger, larger, more physically capable dog. You must allow the dominant dog priority, such as the opportunity to go outside, to come in, or to receive food or your attention and affection.
- If you are petting the dominant dog and the subordinate dog approaches, make him wait. Avoid all circumstances that bring out any aggression.
- If the dogs are likely to fight when you are away or at homecomings, separate the dogs whenever you are out, or are not able to supervise.

Step 2:

Work with each dog separately and teach them the cue, "Leave it" (see the Golden Rule Library for step-by-steps). The goal is to train each dog to disengage from whatever behavior he is involved in and come to you immediately. Begin with something of moderate value to the dog such as a toy or a treat he likes.

You can also use a clicker to train by marking the good behavior.

Step 3

It is important to recognize canine body language and low level threats such as eye contact, snarls or low growls. Keep records of threats, attacks, or tension producing situations. You must have control over both dogs in order to be successful. Once you have the "Leave it" cue proofed, you can then manage the circumstances that might elicit aggression.

Step 4

When coming home, greetings should be calm and ignore both dogs for a few minutes; this is so you don't insight unnecessary excitement that could escalate between the dogs. Avoid giving them any treats unless the dogs are separated.

Step 5

Make sure the dominant dog gains preferential access to food, resting places, territory, guardian attention and treats. Getting the dogs together without incident can be done when the dogs are distracted and clam, when confrontation is unlikely, such as during walks or feeding. If the dominant dog tends to eat the other dog's food, separate them for feeding times.

When you are walking your dogs, it would be more effective and more relaxing for you if you have a second person walking with you. Allowing each person to walk one dog instead of trying to control both of them makes for a better experience for all.

Step 6

If you want to work on the two dogs feeding in the same area, keep the dogs at a distance, far enough apart that they do not show aggression. Slowly move the dishes closer together, as long as the dogs do not react; move them a few inches at a time. The food serves as a reward in this situation. If the dogs react, the food bowls are moved further apart.

Step 7

If you are concerned the dogs may get into a squabble when you are not at home, you may have to keep them separated or you can crate them (we do not recommend crating more

than 4 hours at a time).

Frequently Asked Questions:

What should I do when one of my dogs challenges another?

Aggression between household dogs can be difficult to manage; you will need to identify the subordinate dog, and ensure that you are not encouraging the subordinate dog to challenge the more dominant. It is critical that you never come to the aid of the subordinate against the more dominant. If left alone, the dogs will often use posturing and threats to end encounters without injury. If one dog backs down, the problem may be resolved. However, if neither dog is willing to give up the challenge, a fight will typically be the result.

The common mistake we make as humans is to try and make life fair. This often results in owners allowing the subordinate dog to have access to resources, such as attention, treats, or toys first. Usually the subordinate dog would not confront the dominant dog when no one is around to protect him. If you encourage or protect the subordinate dog, he may exploit the situation, and the dominant dog may become aggressive in order to assert his control. More importantly, if you then punish the dominant dog for aggression, the subordinate dog learns he can engage in prohibited behavior while the guardian is present. This is why, in many households, there is no fighting when the guardians are gone. The subordinate is aware of the situational basis to the hierarchy, and does nothing to challenge the dominant dog, unless the guardians are around to support them.

My dogs have lived together for some time and now they are fighting. Why?

Fights between dogs in the home are often about social position. Aggression based on social position typically occurs when dogs reach social maturity, between 12 and 36 months of age. Fights will be about those resources that are considered important to dogs; these fights may take place over treats, owner's attention, priority to greet the owner when arriving home, sleeping places and doorways around the home. It can also happen when there is a tight space and during highly arousing situations such as front window disturbances where the dogs gather to see what is going on outside; this can escalate quickly as they try to get in front of each other. These fights occur most often between dogs of near equal status and often, but not always, dogs of the same sex.

Change in Pack Order in the Home

Conflicts can take place between dogs when the dominance status is uncertain or when they are particularly close in rank. For example, if after an illness or death of an older dog, fighting may begin in the remaining dogs even when one is clearly dominant. This is because the older dog may have been dominant to both dogs, and now they are trying to establish new positions.

Other changes can also affect the pack order which causes an issue within the hierarchy; such as a new dog enters the family, when one dog reaches social maturity, when one dog becomes old in the eyes of the other or when one dog's health is compromised.

In these cases, the fighting can be severe and cause injury. Although you should generally attempt to allow dogs to resolve their differences on their own, you will need to intervene if there is the potential for injury. Be careful! You could be injured due to redirected aggressive attacks, or when you attempt to break up the fight, extreme care is necessary.

My younger dog always deferred to the older dog, but now they fight.

One scenario that can result in social aggression is when an older, previously dominant dog, is challenged by a younger, more dominant dog. This may happen as the older dog ages, or as the younger dog reaches behavioral maturity at 12 to 36 months. This is often clearly an attempt to change the existing hierarchy. Sometimes the older dog will submit and things are fine but, at other times, the owners do not want the change and intervene. In some situations, the older dog will not relinquish the dominant role even though he cannot physically compete with the younger dog. This can result in severe fights causing injury.

How should I break up fighting if it occurs?

This can be a dangerous situation for people and dogs! Most people try to reach for the collar of the fighting dogs, or if one is small, pick him up. This can result in severe injury if the fighting is intense. If both are wearing leads they can usually be pulled apart. If all else fails, you might be able to break up the fight with a broom, air horn, or banging metal bowls together. If you have a hose nearby, turn the water all the way up and spray the dogs.

Reaching for the dog is usually the worst thing to do because it typically ends in the owner being injured. It is often useful to have a length of stick to defend yourself, should a dog turn on you. This is used to direct the dog's bite to a harmless area, i.e. the stick, **NEVER hit the dog.**

If the more dominant dog is disciplined for being dominant, or it is pulled away and the owner has supported or favored the more submissive dog, the dispute will be prolonged and may even become worse between the dogs. The only time a human should intervene is when there is the potential for injury to either dog or humans in the area. Please keep in mind that when a human intervenes in a dog fight, they have a chance of being injured as well due to redirected aggression.

When people intervene in dog fights, redirected aggression is possible. Aggression (growl, snarl or bite) can be redirected to a person, animal or object other than that which evoked the aggression. If during the course of a dog fight, you pick up one of the dogs, the other may continue to attack and direct his aggression at you.

How to Prevent Aggression

The four most important guidelines to help prevent serious aggression problems:

- Proper puppy socialization and identification of temperament in your dog
- Physical and mental exercises will help refocus aggression and energy
- Obedience training to create a foundation of the human as pack leader
- Make the dog work for everything; dogs should follow a simple command of sit, stay, or lie down before receiving food, affection, toys, or treats

If aggression becomes more serious, an animal behaviorist may need to be brought in to work with the dogs. Occasionally, a veterinarian will recommend drugs for one or both of the dogs. Typically, medication should be a last resort, as it fails to fix the underlying cause. In more aggressive sibling rivalry, until the problem is solved, these dogs should be separated.

Sources:

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YOUR OWN BACKYARD HIERARCHIAL TREE, By Shannon K. Steffen

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