



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

Breaking Up Dog Fights

We hope you never have a dogfight in your home, but just in case, here are some techniques that might help defuse or break up a confrontation. The best scenario is one in which you can predict when a fight is likely to break out – for instance, you see the dogs begin to stare at each other, or one of them is obviously trying to get a valuable resource from the other. At that point – at the precursor to the behavior – you should intervene, and preferably in a controlled, pleasant manner (as though the dogs were two year old kids fighting over a toy). Most dogs only fight if their owners are present, and these techniques are geared for that scenario. If your dogs fight when you are not present, you'll need to consult with an experienced trainer or counselor.

Both these intervention techniques work only if you see a fight coming, not if the dogs are already confronting each other. They also work best if you've practiced them often – maybe twice a day, while the dogs are playing or interacting in some way. That way they'll understand what's coming.

The “Hot Dog” Cue

1. Stand up, and move either between them or very close to them, while saying loudly “Treats!” or “Hot Dogs!”
2. Don't hurry, but do walk quickly into another room, like the kitchen, and do something predictable and wonderful – like open the refrigerator door.
3. Give the dogs the best reinforcement you can think of – like a hot dog or piece of chicken - ask for a sit, and then feed them.

“Do it Outside!”

Again, this technique should be used at the onset of the behavior – when you feel the tension rising.

1. Stand up, move into the dogs, and in a large, authoritative voice, tell them to stop the behavior.
2. Walk through the dogs, open the back door and go through it. If the dogs aren't actually fighting, taking one or both by the collar could be a good idea.
3. Put or lead them both outside, and go back inside the house. The chances are very good that the dogs will just want to be with you, and will stop their arguing.

If your dogs are actually fighting, neither of the two techniques above will work. Instead, if they both defer to you on a regular basis, shouting “no, bad dogs” might have an effect, or make a large noise with a whistle or pots and pans (or whatever is at hand). If that doesn't work, consider using a thick blanket to throw over one or both of them, or dump water on their heads. If there are two people, grabbing the dogs by their tails or back legs and lifting up often diverts them. Or use shaving cream or canned whipped cream to spray in their faces. Whatever you do, don't get your hands near their teeth – they may bite you by mistake. If the dogs have had more than one fight or have injured each other, the situation is much more serious, and could be one which cannot be resolved.

Trish King
Director, Behavior and Training