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Sibling rivalry more common than expected, should be taken seriously

Dear Gus,

Do you think sibling rivalry exists in dogs?

Gerald B. Orange

Gerald, the short answer is yes. This is a much more common problem than one would think, and something I personally see all the time. Not only does it occur between actual siblings or in any multiple-dog household, but also on occasion when a new human member comes in to the family.

Dogs are pack animals and need to establish a hierarchy to be comfortable in their roles. So when a new 'pack member" (human or otherwise) comes into the home, they need to reestablish this hierarchy. Dogs have a strong need for a leader and without establishing a clear leader they will continually be an unstable pack. So when fighting develops it is typically a means of finding the alpha dog, or canine pack leader. These problems will mimic bullying behavior which is exactly what it is.

Catalysts can be food, toys, and treats, or even attention given by the human pack leader (and dog owners should always be the pack leader.) Most of these problems can be avoided with some simple knowledge and many times should be left to play themselves out.

One thing that is important is to reinforce the leadership of the "alpha dog" over the subordinate dog by feeding this dog first, giving it attention first, etc. That said, always be on the alert if you have two males with aggression issues since this can escalate into fights that require a dog or dogs being hospitalized or an owner injured trying to break up a fight.

The only remedy in this situation is for the dogs to be separated when someone isn't going to be there to supervise. It's critical that owners are able to control and manage obedient behavior. Rarely will a male-female or female-female pair escalate to the point of physical injury.

As a side note, the issue of pack behavior and the need to establish hierarchy within the pack is one of the main reasons I avoid dog parks and dog establishments where total interaction between dogs (strangers) are encouraged.

Socialization of your pet with strangers, especially with children and other dogs is essential for your pet, however only if done properly and with other well controlled dogs.

Hope this helps.

Gus

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