

Introducing Unfamiliar Dogs To Each Other

What To Know About Dog Behavior Beforehand & What To Do



Introducing Two Unfamiliar Dogs That Will Need To Coexist

Best Practices

I've written this article because it seems that much of the information about canine behavior concerning aggression between dogs seems to be written from the perspective of dog trainers that apparently thought the movie the Lady and The Tramp was a documentary.

Below you will find information that I would recommend being aware of before introducing two unfamiliar dogs. Additionally, if you would like to introduce two dogs, mainly because your household is merging with another dog-owning household or you have friends that have dogs where contact is inevitable or merely in hopes that they might benefit from regular contact, there's information on how to do this as safely as possible, assuming there's doubt in your mind as to how one or the other dog might react.

For what it's worth, it's best to play it safe right from the beginning and make no assumptions about how things might go over the short or the long term. Below you'll read about a few addressable factors that can upend relationships between dogs that were getting along but 'suddenly' do not get along.

Also, always keep in mind that while you may, have a pretty good idea of how your dog may react based on past experiences, you cannot

and should not be sure about the other dog. No matter how strong its owner's assurances. As you'll read below, there are factors that naturally influence and subsequently change behavior and these factors often catch dog owners that think 'they know,' off guard. These are the circumstances that spawned the not uncommon dog owner phrase, "I'm so sorry! He/she, has never done that before!"

Why Dogs Fight

There are various classifications/reasons behind dogfights. The first is the most serious in the sense that they can lead to death. Typically these triggers are driven by evolution. These are fights to the death driven by factors related to triggers connected to the survival of genes.

Inter-Pack

When the stakes are who gets to pass on who's genes things can get ugly so combat for breeding rights or if food resources are scarce can result into escalations in intensity that lead to death or injury due to battles leading to attrition when the combatants are too equally matched.

Outside Pack

The number one cause of death of wolves is wolves from outside their known social group. This makes perfect sense when looked at from an evolutionary perspective, but when you have unfamiliar dogs seeing each other on walks in a 'shared' neighborhoods, it can be problematic.

There are some breeds and individual dogs that have had this sensibility tamped down. Golden Retrievers are a simplified example, but I have seen it in breeds that it wouldn't be expected as well. Perhaps one

day we will have bred this aspect out of dogs but for the time being it's better to understand that most dogs to varying degrees are somewhat more in tune with their cousins the wolves and go on a heightened state of alert when they see another dog in an area they perceive as their territory. Some things can be done to redirect their instincts and ideas that are often done that inadvertently make the behavior far worse than it should be.

In my experience, to a reasonable extent with all of our ducks in a row, any dog can be taught to behave around unfamiliar dogs. However, that's a far cry from liking unfamiliar dogs, and it's a difficult path for many companion dog owners if their dog is naturally genetically reactive or has learned to become dog aggressive.

Age

While a dog is in the puppy stage of life, in most cases, all may appear to be well in the dog park, or chance encounters with unfamiliar dogs on the street and at home. As during that period, there is necessarily a governor on both pups and familiar adult dogs that tamps down some of the baser evolutionary traits/responses that might be triggered were the same behaviors to come from a familiar adult dog.

The puppy 'knows' not to push too hard lest it unleashes an adult's wrath for which it cannot physically cope, and the adults will make allowances in the pup that they may be unlikely to extend to an adult dog. That doesn't mean puppies don't cross the line or aren't physically disciplined. It just means allowances are made.

However, when a young dog hits somewhere between 12 months and 18 months of age, they may decide that they've got what it takes to

assert themselves and/or an adult determines it's time for the no-longer puppy to learn to exercise the control of an adult - or else. This can really take a companion dog owner off guard if they haven't prepared for this inevitable eventuality with the right sort of relationship building and training between themselves and both dogs.

Gender

Aggression can be more common in males. More common still in intact males. However, when it occurs between females, usually females once used for breeding, there's rarely a happy ending as there are some strong evolutionary triggers at play.

Human Interference - Genetics

Most breeds of dogs have hard-wired into themselves a governor that kicks in when their pack-member opponent submits. Emphasis on pack member. Things should only escalate up to the point where 'the point' has been made. From an evolutionary perspective, there's no sense in damaging your pack member as you need that pack member for survival.

However, there are breeds of dogs that have been subjected to selective breeding motivated by the darker side of humanity for fighting to the death. Others for enhanced territoriality. The latter if handled incorrectly can often have that enhancing take them over the edge very easily. If you have one of these breeds or suspect your dog has some of those sorts of genetics, you may find your dog cannot put the brakes on when the other pack-dog submits or requires a higher level of training and environmental supervision.

Human Interference - Environment

One of the major causes of skewing a dog's natural genetics and exponentially increasing the likelihood of dog-to-dog aggression is allowing dogs to look out windows or be left in yards in urban environments. What a farm dog does, is alert to intruders, keep the wolves and coyotes away from the livestock and kills every pest it can catch within a certain radius of its home base. The city dog has the same wiring but the triggers (dogs walked past, children playing, squirrel activity, etc) is unrelenting, and in time, usually between the ages of 18 and 36 months where the farm dog would alert, consider and then act, the city dog has literally abandoned cognitive processing. Instead, the dog becomes conditioned into a split second zero to sixty miles per hour level of agitation that leads to significant aggression problems.

Human Interference - Avoidance

Sometimes dogs will get along unless there's a specific resource. For example, a butcher's bone or a piece of rawhide, etc. Other than that, they get along fine. Many dog owners deal with this by removing the literal and metaphorical bones of contention as a means of avoiding confrontation. I worry about this approach as it seems that sooner or later it happens that the same or a similar item turns up and a dog or someone trying to break up the fight gets hurt. I prefer to make an effort to see if we can't address the behavior more permanently and safely. Sometimes, all attempts fail, and avoidance is all that is left.

Human Interference - Killing Or Injuring With Kindness

Dogs that live together will often unnecessarily escalate the aggression between themselves if their owners constantly undermine the natural process dogs use to avoid the most severe bloodshed levels of aggression. By this, I mean that their owners break their fights up before a conclusion as to who is faster, stronger, more agile and/or just more driven to win.

The odd fight between dogs that know each other and see each other frequently and typically get along are rarely any big deal, and the dogs should be left to work out their differences. Bloodshed is rare and is usually no more than a nick here or there on a tongue, ear or lip.

When dog owners constantly interrupt these bouts, they solve their own problem (letting a couple of dogs you care about fight it out is tough) but leave the dogs' problem unresolved. They often make things even worse by chastising the dog that was 'reminding' the other dog to stay in his or her lane so that things don't have to get far more serious at a later date due to an uncorrected skewed sense of hierarchy. The owners will often soothe the dog on the receiving end. In the long run, this doesn't serve either dog very well as sooner or later the piper will call to be paid, but by that point, frustrations may be so high that the level of the fight isn't disagreement intensity, it's hard-lesson time and the likelihood of significant injury or death increases.

Most dogs will work things out if left to do so. However, you must first give consideration whether any of the other elements mentioned in this article may be contributing to a conflict between your dogs as if so,

these elements need to be addressed before leaving dogs to work things out themselves should be considered.

Human Interference - Relationship

Believe it or not, the number one cause of aggression between two dogs in the same household isn't an ongoing or new relationship between the dogs. It's the relationship the dogs have (don't have) with the two-legged folk in their lives.

Most of us live with our dogs like roommates. With one dog, that doesn't lead to the best training, but most people co-habit just fine with their dogs. With two dogs, without a clear idea as to who is living in whose house the dogs are naturally more inclined to inventory resources and compete for them. Food, treats, first step out the door, in the door, up the stairs, down the stairs, who gets petted first, most, etc. depending on the preferences of the dogs, become resources to fight over. Whereas in homes where ongoing clear reminders from the dog owner, as to, "This is my house, you two just live here.", there is less conflict as the resources have been spoken for.. "These aren't our toys, these are our owner's toys that we get to use."

Relationships are influenced by training to a certain extent but the impact of the frequency and way we ask, follow through, decide to ignore, and a myriad of seemingly minor interactions inside (and outside) the home, day in, day out, when we're not training has arguably even more influence. Dogs are learning whether we are formally teaching or not. How to harness this to your advantage is tied to training, but is ironically not typically incorporated into companion dog training by most people that consider themselves companion dog trainers.

Human Interference - Training (Overall) In North America

What passes for companion dog training now in North America is what we once would have referred to as teaching a dog a trick. It's not the dog owners that have dropped the ball, it's the dog trainers. It's an unregulated industry and attracts a lot of people that "love dogs" but aren't the best critical thinkers. As a result, many seem to think that, "The Lady and The Tramp" was a documentary. Very few accomplish much beyond getting a dog to do something for a treat.

They embrace 'All Positive/Purely Positive/Force-Free... .' because it's easy to create the illusion to unsuspecting companion dog owners that their dog's behavior is being influenced and it is - up to a point.

At best, this ideology creates a relationship more akin to that of a drug dealer and drug addict. Sure, the addict is highly motivated but it's rare that the addict can't be influenced by a better deal (squirrel). This type of training aims at a dog's stomach and misses the best part of the dog.

Corporate pet supply stores, franchises have spearheaded this treat flinging nonsense and even in the private training sector as many as 80% use this destructive method. This, in spite of there being no science to support this approach outside of controlled environments such as an Orca or Dolphin's aquarium, scientist's rat maze, dogs are not learning useful life skills. There is at best an illusion of training, that is until a real life, out of the aquarium, maze, distraction occurs.

Long story, short, reliance on treats has led to dependence on equipment to reduce leash tension on the owner's joints. This has given

most companion dog owners the illusion of dog training but not the reality of what their dogs are actually capable. Removing the equipment of a trained dog after even years of equipment reliance will illustrate what's really going on. Equipment over the long term is supposed to act as an emergency brake, used once in a blue moon, not dozens of times every walk, day after day, month after month, year after year.

This contributes to the issue at hand in the following manner. When a dog moves in an undesired way, people have little choice and have now come to believe it is correct and reasonable to restrain with steady leash pressure and as a result over time unintentionally agitate their dogs in precisely the same manner that dogs that being trained to become aggressive are handled. Dogs are also observant. If one notes another across the street or approaching is tensing (due to leash pressure) it will likely wonder why and begin (initially) to subtly posture as well. In time this escalates and the dog that should have been taught to walk on a loose leash - no matter what, has instead been taught, at best, - to patrol and quite often has been conditioned into become leash aggressive.

In other words, companion dog owners without a dog that knows how to exert self-control have to resort to "emergency brake" devices (collars, harnesses, etc.) to reduce pulling impact on their own joints. As a result, they inadvertently feed territorial aggression. Dogs that spot each other while being walked on leash where that leash is continually tensioned, eventually signal with body language and more often than not ultimately vocalized agitation when they see another dog, rather than relaxed posturing. The other dog, very likely similarly untrained reciprocates. Even if trained, it will probably send out its own warning signals. In time, with enough repetition this makes a walked dog think

every dog they meet is leaning more towards being a foe, rather than a friend.

How To Introduce Worst Case Scenario Approach

What You'll Need

- Competent Handlers
- Safe Training Equipment
- Safety Equipment
- Neutral Territory

Competent Handlers

In worse case scenarios you'll need two handlers for each dog and one more to handle the fire extinguisher (more on that in a bit). By competent, I mean people that will not panic if a dogfight ensues.

Dogfights are disturbing to most people. If sufficiently disturbed human beings lose their fine-motor skills and other than kicking and clubbing aren't much good for anything else, and as neither of those strategies is recommended or likely to work, and more likely to get the flailing person injured, it's best to make sure you choose your dog handlers carefully.

The reason you want two handlers for each dog is that if the dogs are large enough and agitated enough it can be a bit like a single fireman on the end of a high-pressure hose whereas if there's a second handler to

pick up a longer dragging leash and each handler walks in opposite directions they can more quickly bring the dog under physical control.

The fifth handler is almost never needed and shouldn't play any role other than background bystander unless the primary handler requests their assistance. See Safety Equipment below

Safe Training Equipment

- Collars (Almost never harnesses)
- Leashes
- Long Leashes

Collars

The primary purpose of a collar in this context is not for subtle training. It is for maximizing physical control should things go south.

If your current collar does not provide you with that level and you are unsure of what to select, contact me so I can ask a few questions and make some suggestions.

If the dog is smaller or the handler is strong enough a Martingale collar would be a safe choice. If in doubt, I would recommend, Wade Collar's Power Steering Dog Training Collar which I designed to give people that need some time to overcome their dog's physicality so they can regain access to their dog's brain for teaching.

Some collars might, due to design or misuse unintentionally agitate the dogs, so collar selection is essential. The prong/pinch collars come to mind but while they lack subtlety in these situations if the dog has been

acclimatized even they may play a role in achieving your goal. As a rule though, because they lack of 'degrees' of subtlety/leverage and tendency to go right to the "pinch" in lunging scenarios, they can further agitate an already agitated and perhaps inexpertly handled dog.

Also, do not introduce a new collar in the minutes before introducing two dogs if that collar will provide you with significantly more control/leverage over your dog's physicality.

Give the dog an opportunity to connect the dots that their lack of ability to dominate a situation physically is due to your 'skills' (learned in low end distractions) as opposed to some mysterious influence projected by the other dog that they already have their doubts.

Ideally, introduce new equipment in the dog's own home and practice a few basic exercises that are likely to trigger the dog's physicality less severely than the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar dog.

You definitely want a collar that will not, under any circumstance slip over either of the dog's heads. Almost without exception when I have been assured that this is the case, it is not. ALMOST ALWAYS!

Under no circumstances rely on the belt-like collars with the snap-together clasps. It is not the clasp failure that is likely, it is that these collars loosen under pressure. Almost every dog hit by a car was wearing one of these collars 5 minutes before impact with an aghast dog owner holding a leash still attached to the collar sans dog.

Unless your dog is likely to injure its throat because of poor breeding practices and inherent known weakness in their esophagus and

trachea avoid harnesses. You cannot control the head well enough to control the body when the chips are down.

Leashes

Ideally, a broken in good quality leather leash over any other material as it's far more comfortable on the hands. A sudden lunge by a dog attached to a nylon type leash can literally burn an uncalloused human hand triggering the release of the leash due to reflex. Alternatively, wear gloves.

Long Leashes

Only required if you're adding the backup handlers. Attached to the same or potentially a different collar if you're looking for building in an additional safety redundancy. As with regular leashes, the risk of rope burn should be considered so either use padded horse lines or wear gloves.

Safety Equipment

Fire Extinguisher

The most reliable means of breaking up a dog fight and giving handlers an opportunity to regain control of the situation from a physical perspective while avoiding serious injury to the dogs and equally importantly, themselves, is a CO2 fire extinguisher. It doesn't always work, but it almost always works.

This would be the role of the optional fifth handler, but in a pinch, either primary handler can fulfill the role. Just plan out in advance, who does what and when.

As mentioned earlier, unrehearsed fine motor skills often go out the window in stressful situations, so it also doesn't hurt to practice using the fire extinguisher (without dogs present) beforehand if you're unfamiliar with the process, so purchase a rechargeable fire extinguisher.

Muzzles

Muzzles are for safety only and don't forget they can come off when you least expect. I rarely use them as behaviorally speaking they do shut some dogs down and just because there's no reactivity wearing the muzzle doesn't mean there won't be when it comes off. However, when in doubt, safety first. As with new collars, make the introduction to a muzzle well before the meet and greet.

Basket muzzles are less stressful as the type that clamps a dog's jaws tight also prevent panting which can cause overheating and additional stress to an already potentially stressful situation. The kind that have an extra center strap running from the muzzle down, up the nose and between the eyes add an added element of security.

Select Neutral Territory (VERY VERY IMPORTANT)

Bringing an unfamiliar dog through the door is often just asking for trouble. You never know what conclusions a dog that looks out windows every day and barks at passing dogs is going to arrive, but in many cases, it's a reason for an attack. Also, neutral means completely unfamiliar to either dog both from the perspective of where they live but where they commonly visit.

Before Hand

Thoroughly Exercise Each Dog Separately Before Hand

The idea isn't so much to tire each dog so that they're too tired to fight as it is to release pent-up energy beforehand, as much the same as recess serves for children and cardiovascular exercise in general, it can have a calming influence on the brain's chemistry allowing with better cognitive processing.

Please note, don't confuse a walk with cardiovascular exercise. There is no similarity. Other than burning a few calories walks typically contribute very, very little to a dog's fitness or mental well-being and often are just the unintended daily deposit to increasing a dog's agitation when it sees other dogs.

Run Through Some Obedience Routines Shortly Before They Meet

More so to reinforce who is the teacher and who is the student and perhaps get the dogs into a listening mode.

Other Introduction Approaches

Using Other Dogs

If both dogs have other dogs, they already get along with, introducing one estimated to be the least likely to make a smooth transition to the other while the other is in the pack of familiarity can put the outlier dog off enough to question the wisdom of picking the fighting route. They essentially give a little more thought as to how to proceed. They are usually aware that in that situation, they won't be picking a fight with one dog but potentially several dogs and will often choose to find ways to ingratiate themselves.

Put One Or Both Dogs In Near By Crates Initially From A Distance

Because both owners are right there, I would have both leashes on the well separated crated dogs by threading the leash through the walls of the crate. Calmly watch what they do and have a cup of tea. If they settle down, move the crates closer. Have another cup of tea. Repeat until they're close enough to sniff.

If the owners know their dogs well enough, they can use the leash to interrupt agitation, but only if it's very early and very low levels of agitation, as otherwise you risk pushing the dog in the wrong direction. The effectiveness of this is directly related to what I wrote earlier about relationships and training approaches.

If things are looking good, move the crates a safe distance apart and before letting either out pick up the leash, so you're not caught off guard, and each owner takes their dogs back to their chairs and has another cup of tea.

Return the dogs to the crates, have a 'drank too much tea' bathroom break and move the crates a bit closer together and give it another whirl. On average if things have gone well, the dogs should be fine.

However!!!

I recommend assuming nothing and planning for potential triggers so remove everything that might trigger aggression until you are able to introduce possible triggers purposefully one by one over whatever timeline you think is appropriate. Potential triggers of the supposedly now getting on fine dogs are:

◆ In-Home Territory

- ➔ Doorways
- ➔ Stairways
- ➔ Furniture (Beds and Couches usually)

◆ In-Home Resource Triggers

- ➔ The garbage
- ➔ Food on the counter
- ➔ Their food
- ➔ Treats
- ➔ Paying attention to one dog over the other
- ➔ A favored household family member

◆ **Other Triggers**

- ➔ Together While Window Watching
- ➔ Doorbells and knocking
- ➔ Retrieval Games
- ➔ Getting ready for walks

Behaving Vs. Enjoying Each Other's Company

Bullies

Once in a while, I run into a couple of dogs that live together where there isn't bloodshed, but there is unrelenting harassment of one dog over the other. Often this is a byproduct of the owner's failure to make it clear to that dog in particular who is living in who's house. Even so, it's not much of a life for the bullied dog and if efforts to settle the bully down fail it's far better to re-home one of the dogs as that's no way to have to live.

Other Personalities

There are dogs that for excellent reasons are never going to like seeing or being around unfamiliar dogs. Sometimes it's just the dog's personality, it might even be the dog's age. Old dogs sometimes don't have the drive or physical ability to cope with younger dogs.

Also, small dogs often worry if the other dog is comparatively speaking an energetic flailing giant of a dog or even puppy and seem to bristle or even explode with aggression if their line of comfort is crossed. The same dogs may very well enjoy the company of a dog of more

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comparable size, unless they've been conditioned into belief that better safe than sorry and all dogs are bad.

Hope that helps!

Regards,

John 'Ask The Dog Guy' Wade

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