

Home
 The Dog Scene
 Dog Blog
 Where to Find Us
 Directory
 Calendar of Events
 Articles
 Press
 Contact Us

Articles

May, 2008 Issue

- ✓ Dog vs Dog: Canine aggression is really a people problem
- ✓ FETCH Tip: Do It Yourself Pet First Aid Kit:
- ✓ Well-Heeled Dog: Come Rover! Come! Really! Making it fun when the fun is over

Archives

Dog vs Dog

Canine aggression is really a people problem

by Donna Reynolds



Editor's note: Almost every human fears an aggressive dog, but that fear, like many other human fears, is at least in part rooted in myth and misunderstanding. This month we share a perspective on dog-dog aggression that is based on a compassionate view of the former dogs of Michael Vick, who were bred to fight and kill.

Dog-dog aggressive behavior has become a hot topic in recent years. Entire workshops, obedience classes, and pet columns have been devoted to discussing the nuances of this natural, but challenging canine behavior. It's hard to know if our pets are being positioned to argue more with other dogs or if society is just becoming less tolerant when they do. We can certainly blame the rising popularity of housing multi-dogs in tight urban quarters for some of the strife. Smaller living spaces and less-than-responsible dog owners serve to create the same kinds of stress and challenges that we humans face when struggling to live peaceably with our own kind. Dogs are only human, after all.

Added dilemmas to dog-dog harmony: The now-raging chihuahua fad is amplifying the age-old tensions between tiny dogs and large dogs (ouch!), under-worked canines are taking matters into their own paws and creating their own entertainment, and

chaotic dog parks are creating as much trouble as benefit for all breeds. Perhaps the biggest set-back of all is our loss of understanding of canine behavior. As society becomes divorced from our roots on the farms and ranches of yesterday, we're quickly losing the wisdom that used to guide us in all-things-animal.

Blame it on progress. Our great-grandparents' rural perspective afforded them a highly practical and realistic understanding of natural law, including animal law. We can't go back, but how do we swing our dog-think into balance and apply it to today's world so our dogs can succeed?

As it turns out, pit bulls may be the perfect teachers to help re-educate society on the finer points of managing and avoiding dog-dog aggression.

They're especially good at challenging our ideals on just about everything. When it comes to current notions about canine aggression, the Michael Vick dogs got busy with breaking all the rules: They weren't supposed to be salvageable, they weren't supposed to be safe with kids and they certainly weren't supposed to be able to co-exist with other dogs. After all, these were reported to be fighting dogs, hard-wired for battle and hell-bent on anti-social behavior with dogs. But are they? Almost one year after the initial fight bust, nearly two dozen Vick dogs are living in homes with other dogs and succeeding as normal, every day family pets. So what happened? Why aren't they following "the rules" about fighting dogs and dog-dog aggression?

The answers are easy: Dogs are individuals and many defy the selective breeding efforts meant to create certain traits. We humans have been too busy blaming dogs for behaviors that we ourselves set into motion.

The families now enjoying the Vick dogs understand this. When any dog fights, it's because a careless or heartless human has accidentally or intentionally set them up to engage in combat. That situation could be a staged battle in the pit or a rushed greeting with an inappropriate play partner at the dog park. When dogs DON'T fight - as in the case of the Vick dogs now living in foster homes - they're following the designs of a good leader who is consciously setting them up for nothing but success. The mechanics of this success involve respecting each dog's individual limits with other dogs, proper socialization to increase dog tolerance, and clear guidance so each dog knows what's expected of him. It's not entirely unlike dealing with a boisterous 3 year old child in a rough and rowdy play group.

To be fair, this success-through-management drill is as true for our ball-possessive Husky as it is for the Vick dog in our house, as it is for the ___name the breed___ dog in your house. All breeds can fight, and all can be managed so that potential never surfaces. The choice is ours. Some dogs need more management than others and because all dogs are individuals, it's true that some yellow labs need more management than some pit bulls - without question.

One way to make peace with this big responsibility we've taken on is to dig back into our cellular memory to a time when we invited the wild wolves to live in our camps. No matter how we dress them, our foofoo pets are still wolves at heart, and we're still the ones that decided to wrangle their animal instincts so we could co-exist. You can take the dog out of nature, but you'll never be able to take nature out of the dog. Nor would we like them much if we could!

Everybody Calm Down! 8 Tips to Avoid Aggressive Encounters

1. Spats Happen! It's a fact of Dog Life; even those dogs that generally get along can break into an argument if one or both are offended or challenged.
2. Study your dog. Understand his body language so you can know when he might be reaching his limits with another dog. If a real fight does happen, learn from it so it doesn't happen again.
3. Avoid triggers. As with children, fights can spark up from the most seemingly insignificant triggers, even between dogs that are buddies. Some common triggers: Arguments over toys, food, favorite dogs or even favorite people (resource guarding). A perceived challenge such as intense eye contact, tug-o-war game or rough play can set a dog off. Know your dog's triggers and work with a trainer to desensitize him to these as much as possible so they lose their charge.
4. Nix nose-to-nose greets. In the quest to make dogs more dog-social, resist the temptation to allow your dog to do rushed nose-to-nose greets between dogs that don't know each other. Instead, create a ritual of slow, uber-relaxed intros that include side-by-side walks in neutral territory. Taking your time will give you the chance to read signals that say, "I don't really like this dog."
5. Be leash savvy. Leash reactivity (an annoying behavior of lunging or growling on leash) can start when dogs become ever more frustrated about greeting other dogs. Handlers can create fast improvements by curbing leash greets and taking on the new role of confident clown and animated leader. Look for training classes that teach pet owners how to motivate their pets and capture their attention with fun and rewarding distraction exercises that teach a dog that other on-leash dogs are off-limits.
6. Know the realities. Studies (Cornell University, NY) have shown that same-sex housemate pairs, especially females, have more problems than opposite sex pairs. Excitement is one of the biggest fight triggers between dogs of all breeds. The study indicated that conflict in the home is much more common between female dogs while males were more likely to instigate fights outside of the house. Treatments most often recommended for household aggression are desensitization with counter conditioning and obedience training.
7. Know your dog's tolerance level. Do you know your dog's limits with other dogs? Does he has a short fuse, a long fuse or somewhere in between? Be realistic about what he can put up with from other dogs and what kind of play or behavior he will not tolerate.
8. Protect your dog from a bad dog-dog experience. Not all dogs want or need to be friends with other dogs. Smart socializing involves respecting your dog's quirks and setting him up for only success with other dogs. Appropriate play partners and positive dog-dog interactions will increase his tolerance for all kinds of dogs and dog behavior. The more positive interaction any dog gets with other dogs, the more likely he will develop and maintain dog-tolerant behavior for life.

About the Author:

Donna Reynolds is the co-founder and Executive Director of Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pitbulls (BADRAP). She lives in Oakland with her husband, four dogs, and ever changing foster dogs. She can be reached at donna@badrap.org.

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