

## Behavior Tips: *Help! I think my dogs are fighting!*

### *What is inter-dog aggression?*

Interdog aggression is characterized by consistent, proactive aggression that is not contextual given the social signals, threat level or response received. This means that dogs involved in interdog aggression can attack without clearly signaling to or interacting with the animal that is attacked, so it may feel like it came out of nowhere. Sometimes these dogs attack *despite* the signals the other dog gives that it is not a threat. This type of aggression must be distinguished from other types of aggression that may be caused by fear or pain which could result in one dog being aggressive to another dog for reasons not related to the dog, itself. In true, interdog aggression, the focus of the aggression is the other dog for the other dog's sake because the relationship is problematic.

Normal interactions between dogs involving play will have corrections when mistakes are made. For example, when a puppy bites too hard and the older dog grumbles at them telling them that was too rough. During play, both dogs are very vocal, which can be helpful to differentiate from a real fight as the aggressor tends to be quiet.

Interdog aggression can be highly variable. Behaviours that you may notice, in addition to the fighting, include displacement of other dogs from resting places (one dog enters a room and looks at another dog and that dog leaves), control of activities, access, sites, or resources (standing or lying in front of the water dish so no one can drink) and overt or subtle threats to other dogs (actual blocking or standing over them and growling). Some common situational examples include: the aggressor blocks access to food or a bed, steals other dog's toys simply to control them, staring at other dogs which makes them leave, and overt aggression such as growling, biting on the neck, haunches, legs or chest and subsequent fighting. ***This is a condition for which early help from your veterinarian and/or a specialist is essential.***

Interdog aggression tends to start when dogs reach social maturity (around 18-24 months). During this time there are significant changes in their brain chemistry. These changes may lead to changes in the behaviour of dogs going through social maturity. The aggressor appears to not be okay with these changes, even if they do not involve aggression. Age and body condition are less a determinant of who is aggressive than how well dogs read signals and how flexible they can be about relationship. Interdog aggression tends to occur most often between dogs of the same sex (particularly females), but it can occur between those of different sexes. Interdog aggression seems to be based on social relationships between dogs and how the aggressor perceives their role in this relationship. For this reason, interdog aggression is more commonly seen in dogs that live together rather than dogs that are unknown to each other. If aggression occurs between dogs that are unfamiliar with each other, make sure to rule out fear aggression or normal social posturing while the dogs are getting to know each other.

### ***Keys to successful outcomes and helpful treatment***

Have realistic expectations. Attaining a perfect relationship is often not possible for most of these dogs; however, their quality of life can be excellent with an owner's diligent management. It will take a lot of work, patience, and acceptance to live with these dogs. Intervene as soon as possible with medication and behavior modification, because the longer these behaviors persist, the more difficult it will be to mend the relationship and alter practiced and learned aggressive behaviors. It's important to first identify who the victims and aggressors are and to understand potential triggers. You must protect the victim if they

are truly fearful and exhibiting signs of pathological anxiety by physically separating the aggressor at all times. If one dog is to be rehomed it is usually the victim since the aggressor may need to live alone, or with restrictions, and can be harder to place. Generally, people notice that the more normal of the dogs may be better able to respond appropriately in a fluid or labile manner, and recover and learn from mistakes. The aggressor lacks such flexibility. Always reward appropriate behaviours by reinforcing the dog who is doing the best job, given the social context, of responding appropriately. Avoid punishment of these dogs, as you may make the problem worse if their aggression is redirected or you elicit a fear or pain response.

Basic behavioral modification involves separate attention for each dog, and you can teach these dogs to be calm alone and around each other by helping them have better control over their own behavioural response. Medications can facilitate behavioral modification. Pharmacological intervention is the humane choice in almost all cases. In many cases, it is recommended that the aggressor start on a medication like fluoxetine (a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI)), and the victim receive a SSRI, a tricyclic antidepressant (amitriptyline), and/or a panicolytic medication (gabapentin, alprazolam, clonidine) if they are very fearful. These medications help facilitate learning of new behaviours.

Other helpful interventions include head collars for when dogs are walking or travelling together, as well as car gates or crates for travel. Neutering may also help with reactivity since females in heat or male hormones (testosterone) can exacerbate the aggression or heighten social tension. Neutering does not "fix" aggression, but rather removes whatever hormones may be facilitating the aggression.

Make a plan to separate the dogs safely in an emergency. Do not try to put yourself between the two dogs, as you may be injured or heighten the tension of the situation. Remember to remain calm as yelling is likely to make the situation worse. Using blankets or cardboard can help to physically block the dogs from each other. Spraying club soda or throwing a bucket full of water may interrupt a fight when dogs begin to fight but is not as helpful as the condition progresses.

For day to day management, it is important to keep the dogs separated when not under direct supervision. When unsupervised, keep the aggressor separated in a spare room or crate. Make sure the dogs cannot stare at each other when left. Confining the victim may heighten fear and take control away from the dog who is already being threatened. Placing a bell on the aggressor can help notify the victim when the aggressor is around. Sometimes the household has a third "mediator" dog who recognizes early behaviours and respond to separate the dogs. These dogs may flag when one dog is starting to be aggressive and help prevent/interrupt antagonistic behaviours.

Although these tips are helpful, interdog aggression is highly complex and it is recommended that you discuss any behavioural and/or medical concerns with your local veterinarian. Try to video the dog interactions as much as possible for better evaluation by veterinarians, specialists and trainers; however, do not record in situations that would put you or any animal in danger.

***Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services ([www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org)). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service ([AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca](mailto:AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca)).***