

Feuding Fidos

By Dr. Sophia Yin

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It sounds like a plot from a cheap made-for-TV movie. Two siblings raised together for years. Competition suddenly drives a deadly rift between them. Trapped together under one roof they're forced to fight it out.

No, it's not ripped from the headlines, it's happening in a home near you. It doesn't involve people rather it's a story about their pooches. These dogs fight primarily in their owner's presence.

While most people hope their dogs will get along like best friends, frequently, these fidos fight like archenemies. The typical scenario is that a pup or younger Fido comes into the home and takes a place as second fiddle. He respects older Rover and gives him preferred access to all resources such as toys, attention and treats. But then as pup reaches adolescence or the older addition feels more at home, he wants to cut to the head of the line. So like serious shoppers at a Macy's 12-hour sale, the two dogs rush to grab the toy or to get attention first instead of politely waiting their turn. When neither backs off an altercation involving teeth and skin can ensue.

Owners often wonder if they should let the dogs duke it out to determine who's the dominant one. In the wild this happens but may involve injuries. And when frequent or severe enough one dog often elects to leave. As humans we theoretically occupy the top spot on the totem pole so it's our job to decree that family members are not allowed to fight. And because we have a more developed brain, we can do this without exerting force or using pain.

Here's the general approach. The first line of order is to get the household in control. Exercise one is to teach the dogs to say please by sitting. Do this silently by standing completely still and ignoring them when they want your attention and then the instant one sits, give him a food reward. Then take a few steps and repeat the exercise over and over until both dogs understand that the only way to get what they want is to politely say please. This sounds like it might take a while but it's usually only a matter of 5-15 minutes for them to get the idea. You can start by training both dogs together but if you're concerned about fighting in this situation start with each separately.

Once they get the please down pat, expect them to use it all the time whenever they want something from you. So when they want to be petted, or to eat, or to go outside or for you to toss their toy, instead of letting them push each other aside, make it clear with your actions that they must be civilized. You'll have to practice sit & please in each of these situations until it becomes a habit. Once you do, you'll notice a huge difference.

The second line of business is to prevent fights over food someone accidentally drops on the floor. With the dogs separated at first, drop a bite-sized treat on the floor and when the dog dives for it block him or step on it so he can't get it. He may paw and even gnaw at your feet. Just keep quiet and let your actions tell him to try something else. Eventually he will back off and even offer sit & please. When this happens give him a treat from your hand immediately before he gets up. Then follow by picking the treat up off the floor and handing it to him.

When he's predictably good at leaving the food on the floor, you can start teaching him the cue word "leave-it" to mean "keep your mouth and nose away from the object." Say the word once right before you know he's going to perform the "leave-it" action. Repeat this exercise until he knows the word. Now when you drop something that both dogs want, instead of diving and then getting into fights, they'll wait politely for you to pick it up.

The last exercise for indoors is to bone up on come when called. First practice this with dogs separately and call them only when you know they'll come running or when they're on a leash. To turn convert "come" to a fun game of chase, run the opposite way and give the dogs treats when they catch up.

Use this last game as well as others from the previous book section such as target and place, when you see that the dogs are about to get into trouble. That is, if you see them tense up or observe that one's getting too rowdy, call them apart before an altercation erupts. Then engage them in alternate appropriate, fun activities.

To speed the training up, ignore the dogs when they're apart and only play these and other fun games with them when they're together. This will help them learn that the best things in life occur when they're polite and in the presence of each other.

To see these methods in action watch the quicktime videos at www.nerdbook.com/sophia

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