

Summertime blues? Dog/dog aggression

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There's nothing pet parents like better than socializing with their dog in the California sun. There are, however, two important questions to ask: "Is it safe?" and "Is my dog really having fun?" Your dog speaks to you through body language—ear and tail carriage, stance, behavior and vocalizations. Perhaps your dog is telling you she is experiencing an overload of stress when confronted with other dogs. If so, avoid any potentially dangerous situations while you begin a science-based behavior modification program.

Displays of aggression between members of the same species are common in animals. Conflicts over resources, such as, food, territory, and access to others are well-supported in animal behavior literature. Still, we often expect our dogs to play-nice with "stranger dogs" in group situations and out on neighborhood strolls. Rules of appropriate behavior in dog society are quite different than human manners. You may need to reexamine your expectations and goals for your pup. If your dog exhibits generalized dog/dog aggression, it's unlikely he'll turn into a social butterfly.

Genetics, early socialization or the lack of exposure during the critical period of social development, and traumatic experiences, shape how your dog interacts with other dogs.

Play between dogs should be a 2-way street. They should take turns chasing each other—neither dog being a bully or a target.

Dog/dog aggression can be a dangerous problem for you, your dog, other dogs, and anyone who tries to break up a dog fight. If your dog has an aggression issue of any kind, get a wellness check from your veterinarian to rule out any underlying organic causes that may be affecting behavior.

If your dog has bitten another dog or been in a number of dog fights, engage a certified behavioral consultant to help you work toward changing your dog's underlying drives and motivation. A complete intake evaluation should be given in order to develop a plan of treatment based on your dog's history. It's a complex problem and each case requires an individual approach to assess on-leash aggression, off-leash aggression, territorial aggression, fear-based aggression, fence-barrier aggression, resource guarding aggression, bite hierarchies, ameliorating factors and context.

The amount of time it takes to see improvement varies depending on the severity of the reactivity, your dog's responsiveness to training, and the amount of time you devote to practicing behavior modification protocols.

Behavior modification techniques that include: desensitization, behavior adjustment therapy (BAT), functional rewards, Feisty Fido and clicker training will help you and your pup have a safe and happy summer together. Avoid harsh methods or collars that cause pain as they increase fear and anxiety and may cause aggression (Journal of Veterinary Behavior, 2006).

A realistic goal for you and your dog may be taking your dog for a pleasant walk in the neighborhood without any barking and lunging incidents. If your dog shows signs of anxiety with "stranger dogs", it's all right to skip the group activities and play at home. The booklet *Play Together, Stay Together* by Dr's. Patricia B. McConnell and Karen London is packed with great games for the two of you. Supervised play-dates with doggie friends may be another alternative. Stay safe this summer and have fun with your dog!

GUEST COLUMN



Photo by Cindy Staszak

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