



Canine Rivalry

Canine Rivalry refers to repeated conflicts between dogs living in the same household. Animals that live in social groups, like a household, establish a hierarchical social structure within that group. Dogs determine their place in the hierarchy through control of and access to resources such as food, toys, attention and sleeping spots. A peaceful multi-dog household exists when all dogs know and accept their place in the hierarchy. Conflicts arise between household dogs when there is instability in the social structure and when the ranking of each dog is not clear or is in contention. Dogs generally establish their hierarchy by taking or giving up valuable resources and warn one another initially through snarling, growling or snapping but do not cause injury to one another. Problems arise when dogs do not peacefully establish a hierarchy and altercations intensify to fights where one or both dogs may become injured. Normal dog behaviors include mounting, lip licking, rolling onto the back, or one dog “standing over” another dog by placing their paws or neck on the shoulders of the other. Dogs may also take toys from each other or insist on being petted first.

Why Conflict Occurs

- A new animal has been introduced to the household.
- A resident animal has died or no longer lives in the household.
- A resident animal is reintroduced after an absence.
- A young dog reaches social maturity (between 10 months and 2 years) and challenges the established higher-ranking dog.
- A high-ranking dog ages or becomes ill and cannot maintain her status.

What you can do

- Spay or neuter all of your dogs.
- Establish fair rules and enforce them consistently.
- Practice “Nothing in Life is Free”, an easy and non-confrontational way to establish leadership. Establish yourself as the benevolent leader of the household by controlling access to rewards (treats, toys, access outdoors, etc). Only provide these rewards when the dog has done their “job” (i.e. sitting to go outside, shaking for a treat).
- Cease punishment – it will not resolve the issue and may make altercations worse.
- Sign up for a reward based training class. A well-trained dog will be more responsive to you and recognize you as the leader of the household.

- Do not attempt to influence or define the dogs' rankings by treating them equally or by preventing a higher-ranking dog from asserting her position over another dog. The social hierarchy of the dogs is dynamic and complex, so even attempts to "support the top dog" may be counterproductive. As much as possible, refrain from interfering with the dogs' interactions with each other. Dogs should be allowed to determine control of resources amongst themselves.

Breaking up a fight

- Squirt the dogs with water or make a loud noise to interrupt them.
- Never try to interrupt a fight by grabbing a dog by the collar or placing any part of your body between two dogs. Touching a dog during a fight may result in redirected aggression towards you.
- Separate the two dogs to areas where they can no longer see one another. Look over each dog carefully to see if they have received injuries. Even a small puncture can lead to a problem if it goes unnoticed.
- Seek professional help if your dogs are causing damage to each other.

We Can Help! The Training and Behavior Department at the Humane Society of Western Montana has a variety of resources available to help you and your pets live in harmony. The Humane Society has several dog trainers and a behaviorist on staff to provide affordable group and private training lessons and free behavior consultations.

- Contact Jean, our Animal Behaviorist for a free pet behavior consultation by emailing behavior@myhswm.org or calling the Behavior Helpline at (406) 549-9295.
- Contact Mariah, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer, to inquire about private lessons or a group training class. Email outreach@myhswm.org or call (406) 549-HSWM.
- Check out our website at www.myhswm.org for a complete listing of dog classes, rates and additional information.