



HOW TO BREAK UP DOG FIGHTS

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From time to time, one may have to act quickly to prevent injury to either dogs or humans when one or more dogs get in to a bad scuffle, or an all out fight. Unlike a training scenario in which we would reject the use of aversive methods, this is an emergency. Thus immediate safety and minimizing injury is the first concern. For example, you may give a child a good hard shove in an effort to get him out of the path of a speeding bus, despite the fact that you normally use time-outs or loss of privileges, rather than physical corrections, as your chosen form of discipline.

An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure

The front line defense against the occurrence of fights is a good working knowledge of dog body language, especially stress signals. It's important to remember that normal dog language includes snarls, growls, and aggressive displays. Most are ritualistic and quickly self-limiting, designed not to initiate fights but to avoid them. Sometimes it's fine to let dogs iron out their own differences so long as the interaction is quick and not prolonged, and neither dog seems intent on escalating into something that isn't fairly benign. Chances are that you won't even have time to make the decision, because such interactions are often so fast that they are over before you even get up from your chair.

Good prevention includes learning how to make dog-to-dog introductions as safe as possible. Avoid tension on leashes and having dogs meet on either dog's home territory. Having anti-fight supplies handy so that you can get to them quickly is important even if you are expecting a positive outcome to the interaction.

It is also important to have a good screening process that eliminates most problem dogs from even entering dog parks, play groups, group classes or other venues where dogs congregate off leash.

Some Questions To Ask When Screening Might Include

- Did your dog have experience playing off leash with a variety of other pups and dogs when he/she was still between the ages of 8-16 weeks?
- If so, has your dog continued to play well with unfamiliar dogs?
- Has your dog ever bitten and punctured human or canine skin? (Puppy nipping before age 4-5 months doesn't count.)
- What does your dog do if another dog wants his/her toy, or to get close to you?

Good facility management means having a secure area where at least one dog can be segregated. Firmly installed tether rings, or a gated permanently-constructed holding pen (not an ex pen) are ways in which to accomplish that.

If A Fight Occurs...

If a scuffle does occur and is continuing or escalating and you fear that it will tip over into an all-out fight, or has already done so, there are some interventions you can try. Use the most benign method first if the dogs are not injuring one another. But if there is bloodshed, use what you have to use to get them separated, while preserving your own safety and that of other people. The intention should always be to do as little harm as we can while ensuring safety and preventing injury. Also, remember that all dogs are different. Some of the strategies in our toolbox can escalate some dogs, rather than de-escalate them, so be prepared with a "plan b" just in case.

First and foremost, try not to panic. It is common for people to begin to scream at the dogs, and that can just intensify the tension and make things worse.

Following Are Possible First Course Actions You Can Take:

- One rather ingenious strategy is to simply ring the doorbell, if there is one. Some dogs are so conditioned by that noise that they disengage to see who has come to visit.
- Throw a blanket over them. Some dogs will separate just from that. If they don't, you at least have another small layer of protection from gnashing teeth if you try the next method.
- Water – if you don't have a hose, which can be very effective, keep a spray bottle handy
- Noise – many dogs will disengage if you make some clatter. A metal shaker can with pennies in it (coffee cans work well if you duct tape the lid on after inserting the pennies) or a couple of pans to clunk together, a small air horn from a marine supply store (cover your ears), or even a folding chair thumped on the floor can serve the purpose. Chairs have an added benefit, in that you can use them to insert between the dogs to help separate them without putting your hands in harm's way.

More Extreme Actions:

- Many dogs are not deterred by water alone, and some people suggest having one with water and lemon juice in it, in case one of the perpetrators is a Labrador or other water loving breed for whom water is no deterrent.
- The leg grab. This is a move you should discuss in advance. It usually requires two people. At the same time, both humans grab a dog's hind legs at the point where the knee meets the stifle, and both humans swing their dog to the right, so the mouth parts are headed away from one another, with the dogs in a "wheelbarrow" position. That makes it harder for them to redirect a bite to the human behind them. Remove the dog closest to the door from the room to prevent re-engagement. This is a controversial method. It often works on smaller dogs, but if you use it on large powerful dogs, you may be biting off more than you can chew and could be severely injured. You must carefully weigh your safety before you do any maneuver that involves physically engaging with dogs that are fighting. Redirected aggression is always a possibility, and you should never discount that some dogs are capable of seriously injuring you!

- A "breaking stick" is a tool that dog fighters use to pry one dog's jaws off another dog. It is a very effective technique, but the possession of breaking sticks is illegal since they are used by those who purposely fight their dogs. So what is a legitimate force-free trainer to do? You can legally have plastic tent stakes (Home Depot) or nylon wood splitting devices (Husky brand) This will provide you with a last ditch means of prying one dog off another one if nothing else works. You would tether one dog, then take control of the second dog and back away, so now both dogs are stretched out, before you wedge the stick into the gripping dog's mouth and twist. There are videos on-line that demonstrate the use of a break stick.

Disclaimer

The uses of extreme measures such as lemon sprayed water and break sticks are to be used ONLY IN THE EVENT of the emergency of a serious fight. The Pet Professional Guild considers the use of these tools in normal training scenarios unnecessary and unacceptable.