

Whole Dog Journal™

How to Safely Break Up a Dog Fight

Getting in the middle of two dogs fighting is dangerous – unless you're prepared and equipped.

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Hang around with dogs long enough, and sooner or later you're likely to encounter a dogfight.

It might be a battle over resources – food, toys, territory, or your attention – or one dog taking offense at another's physical communication style. It could be a struggle for position within the social status hierarchy, or simply a matter of a dog being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Perhaps it's a case of redirected aggression – Fido really wanted to attack the stray dog on the other side of the fence but couldn't get to him, so he turned on Snoopy instead. Or you may have the misfortune of experiencing one of the most frightening dogfight scenarios – when an aggressive stray dog attacks yours while the two of you are taking a simple walk on leash around the block.

Dogs fight. Despite the genetic programming that generally allows dogs to live harmoniously in groups, from time to time the harmony is shattered and a real fight occurs. When it does, it can be terrifying and dangerous – to the humans as well as the canines who get involved in the fracas.

Your first instinctive response may be to yell at the top of your lungs to try to break up the battle. Your second is often to reach in and attempt to bodily rescue your canine pal – especially if it appears he is getting the worst of it. Neither of these actions is likely to be effective. Yelling often adds fuel to the stress and arousal that led to the fight in the first place, and only intensifies the battle. Reaching into the fray more often than not results in your receiving multiple lacerations – sometimes inflicted by your own dog, who is too engaged in the battle to recognize or respect his own person's hand, arm, or face.



It pays to think about what you would do if a strange dog attacked your dog when you were out walking together

Of course, you can't just stand back and watch when a ferocious dogfight is in progress, especially if your tiny teacup Poodle is getting mauled by a Mastiff. So, what should you do?

Dog Fight Prevention: Manage and Train *Your* Dog

I've lost track of how many times we've said this, but as always, prevention beats cure. It is imperative that you manage and train your own canine family to minimize the risk of serious dogfights. Identify situations that are likely to light the dogfight fuse, such as fence-fighting or resource guarding, and figure out how to avoid them and/or modify the behavior that causes them.

In addition, you must establish a calm home atmosphere. Dogs who live in a structured environment – where it is clear which behaviors are allowed and which are not – are much more likely to live in harmony than those who live in homes where chaos reigns. Something as simple as requiring all dogs to sit politely before the door is opened to the backyard can help instill order in the pack and respect for you as the benevolent leader of the family.

It's fine to allow your dog to play in groups at places like dog parks, daycare, and neighborhood dog romps, as long as you make sure that members of the social groups are appropriate playmates in terms of size, personality, and play style. Play group opportunities help to keep dogs well-socialized, which helps prevent dogfights.

Most dog parks have rules that require their canine park users to "be nice." Politely ask human guardians of inappropriate members to remove their dogs from the group. If they refuse, remove your own dog(s), and report the offender to the users' group or other authority responsible for monitoring dog park use. If your dog has trouble being "nice" around other dogs, then you will need to take a pass on these social outlets.

If you live in an area where aggressive stray dogs are common, request that your local animal services agency step up their patrol efforts so that you can safely walk your dog. If Animal Services is reluctant to step in, speak with your elected officials about what needs to be done to make the agency more responsive to community needs. If you can identify owners of the errant dogs and feel comfortable approaching them, explain that their dogs are causing problems, and politely ask them to keep the dogs at home where they belong.

Protecting Your Dog Against Other Dogs' Aggression

You can't always predict and prevent incidents of serious dog-dog aggression. You can, however, be prepared to intervene safely to protect your dog – and yourself – should the necessity arise. Familiarize yourself with various tools and techniques that have the greatest chance of successfully quelling doggie disputes with the least injury to all parties. Then determine which are most appealing to you, and be sure to have them on hand (and in your head) should the time come when you need them.

These tools and techniques range from small and simple to big and bold. It is important to remember that none of them are foolproof; they all involve some inherent risk to the dogs who are fighting and to the humans who are trying to intervene, and they all can be applied with varying degrees of success. You will need to weigh the odds and decide, in each case, if the risk outweighs the potential for injury from the fight itself.

The topic of breaking up dogfights came up recently during a discussion between Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) members, and generated an interesting list of suggestions. Let's look at some of them and see how useful they might be (or not!) for the average dog on the street.

Avoiding Dog Fights Altogether

Prevention means making wise decisions about dog husbandry that will keep you in the best position to avoid dangerous conflict.

Beverly Hebert, of Sugar Land, Texas, no longer walks both of her German Shepherds at the same time, so she can better manage a situation if it does arise. She realized that having more than one dog on leash puts her at an impossible disadvantage if she and her canine friends are approached by an unfriendly dog – or pack. She feels much more confident about her ability to use appropriate tools and techniques to protect one dog than two.

She also tries to use good sense about when and where to walk her dogs. She says, “When we were on vacation with our dogs in Taos, New Mexico, my husband wanted to go for walks with the dogs down a mountainside road in an area filled with dogs. He thought I was a ‘Nervous Nellie’ because I wouldn’t do that, but every time we passed a home with no fence and a loose dog I heaved a sigh of relief that our dogs weren’t with us.”

Using Aversives to Stop Dog Fights

Aversives are tools that a dog finds offensive to the senses – smells, sounds, and other stimuli that are strong enough to stop a behavior. In general, aversives can be most effective if used to interrupt fighting dogs prior to full arousal in an altercation; their effectiveness decreases as arousal levels increase, although they may still succeed in stopping many full-scale fights.

Aversives should also be considered primarily a tool for crisis intervention – I don’t recommend using them as basic training tools.

Marni Fowler, of Gainesville, Florida, reminds us that blasting dogs with water from a nearby hose is a tried and true method of separating fighting dogs. She’s right – and it often works – assuming a hose happens to be nearby with a powerful enough spray to do the job. A good tool to keep in your arsenal for the right time and place – like your own yard. Not particularly useful, however, when there’s no hose handy!

One of the easily-portable aversive sprays, such as Direct Stop™ (citronella) or Halt!™ (pepper spray) might be an effective alternative to the hose. Of the two, Direct Stop, available from Premier, is the safer choice, since pepper spray products are more corrosive, and the spray can drift and affect innocent bystanders – humans as well as dogs. There are laws in some jurisdictions requiring that users of pepper spray products complete a training course and carry a permit. In a pinch, even a fire extinguisher, while not easily portable, might just happen to be a handy and effective aversive tool.

Debi Davis, of Tucson, Arizona, trains service dogs from her wheelchair, and is always accompanied by one or more of her own service-trained Papillions. The dogfight topic is of great interest to her, both because her dogs are small and more vulnerable than many others, and because her own mobility and ability to protect them is limited.



While shopping for a plain umbrella that we could paint big eyes on (to make a scary or surprising aversive), we found this umbrella in a children’s clothes shop.

Davis has an air horn attached to her chair that makes 10 different sounds, including sirens, horns, barnyard animals, etc., and she can crank the sound up to a deafening level. Air horns (available at boating supply stores) can be effective at warding off attacking dogs, but your own dog has to be desensitized to the cacophony, or you are likely to lose him as well! You can also risk damage to eardrums, both canine and human, and you do take a chance of frightening your own dog beyond repair.

Nicole Wilde, of Gentle Guidance in Santa Clarita, California, says that she had good success most of the time with air horns when she worked at a doggie daycare center several years ago. Wilde says they were quite effective in breaking up fights in a majority of the cases.

Using Physical Objects to Stop Dog Fights

A number of trainers suggested intervention with a physical object of some kind. If fights are a regular problem in your household you might attach a handle to a sheet of plywood so you can lower it between two sparring dogs and force them apart.

Dogfighters – and some pitbull owners who don't fight their dogs but know the breed's potential – carry a “parting stick” or “break stick” with them wherever they go with their dogs. This is usually a carved or whittled hammer handle, tapered to a rounded point at one end. When two dogs are locked in combat, the parting stick can be forced between a dog's teeth and turned sideways, to pry open the jaws. Parting sticks can break a dog's teeth, and a dog whose jaws have just been “parted” may turn on the person doing the parting. Like many other techniques offered here, this method should only be considered for dire emergencies.

A blanket can also be a useful tool. Tossed over the fighters (one over each works best), it muffles outside stimuli, thereby reducing arousal. This also allows the humans to reach in and physically separate the combatants by picking up the wrapped pooches with less risk of a serious bite – the blanket will also cushion the effect of teeth on skin if the dog does whirl and bite.

Laura Van Dyne, CPDT, of The Canine Consultant, LLC in Carbondale, Colorado, suggests a defensive technique she saw demonstrated at a conference by Trish King, Director of the Behavior and Training Department at the Marin Humane Society in Novato, California. King paints big eyes and teeth in bright paint on an umbrella – the kind that explodes open at the touch of a button – then carries it, folded up, when walking in places where stray dogs are a threat. When an aggressive dog approaches, whoosh!, the “Defend-A-Brella” leaps into action and wards off the threat. You would, of course, need to desensitize your own dogs to the umbrella action prior to using it in real life. This is not as likely to stop a fight in progress, but may well forestall an attack from an approaching dog.

Janet Smith, Behavior Program Manager for the Capital Area Humane Society in Lansing, Michigan, offers a somewhat drastic technique, reminding us that when a dog's life and limb are at stake, drastic measures may be called for. Smith says, “You can wrap a leash around the aggressor's neck or get hold of a collar and twist to cut off the dog's airflow, until he lets go to try to get a breath of air, then pull the dogs apart.”

Of course, this could be more difficult than it sounds. It might be a challenge to get a leash around the neck of a dog who is “attached” by the mouth to another dog



without getting your hands in harm's way, and grabbing a collar to twist also puts hands in close proximity to teeth. Keep in mind that your goal is to avoid getting bitten, at all costs.

Using Your Body to Intervene a Dog Fight

Jackie McGowan, of Click Start Dog Training in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, attended a seminar given by Turid Rugaas, and reports that the highly respected Norwegian trainer had few suggestions for magic techniques for breaking up fights. According to McGowan, Rugaas said that she usually gives dogs a chance to work it out, but if it is apparent that this is not going to happen, she will try and walk between and/or gently pull one dog away by his collar. Rugaas also cautioned seminar attendees that she would not recommend this to others handling a fight because the risk of injury to the human is high.

Carla Baker of A to Z Training in Olympia, Washington, recalls a rather drastic technique she observed in action at a dog show some 20 years ago. "Two dogs got into it and were going to cause some major damage," Baker says. "The elderly judge was a very tiny woman, and she had the handlers both grab their dogs and hold on tight. Then she went up and took the dog on top by the tail and jammed her thumb up his rectum. He let go in an instant and whirled around to see what the heck was happening. The judge excused the two dogs, calmly washed her hands, and then continued her classes without a hitch – just as if it happened every day.

"Don't know that I'd try this myself," Baker concluded, "but it sure did work!"

Valerie Poulton, of Val's Good Dogs in Omaha, Nebraska, offers one more approach to physical intervention; one that could be a little difficult if the aggressor is a 150-pound St. Bernard, but sounds worth trying with a smaller dog. This method was demonstrated at Poulton's training club last year by author and trainer, Suzanne Clothier. Poulton has since tried it herself and reports that it worked for her on two separate occasions with her own dog – but only in a one-on-one dog brawl; she would not recommend it in a multi-dog fight situation.

"Lift the rear of the clearly-identified aggressor so that he is suspended with his forefeet barely touching the ground," Poulton explains. "The dog lets go, and the target can scoot free. "

Poulton cautions that her dog is dog-aggressive only, and will not turn on a human. "Supposedly, in this position the dog is not able to turn on the human suspending him, although I cannot say I have used it with a dog who might try."

Equipment for Dog Fight Break-Ups

Now, all you need to do is stuff a canister of Direct Stop in your pocket, hang an umbrella over your arm, attach a parting stick to your belt, carry a blanket over your other arm, balance a sheet of plywood on your head, wear an air horn around your neck, and be sure you have at least two friends with you to hold dogs while you put your thumb in private places, and you are ready for anything.

Seriously, if and when that next fight happens, take a deep breath, resist your instincts to yell or leap in the middle of the fray, quickly review your available options, and choose the one – or ones – that are most likely to work in that place and time. When the fight is over and no one is being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance, remember to take a moment to relax and breathe, and then congratulate yourself for your quick thinking.

Fight-Stopping Resources

Air horns

Parting sticks

PetSafe Shield (<https://www.chewy.com/petsafe-spray-shield-animal-deterrent/dp/52134>) (citronella)

Halt! Dog Repellent (<http://www.halt.com/halt.html>) (pepper spray)

An umbrella with a face

BREAKING UP A FIGHT: OVERVIEW

- 1. Train your own dogs to respond to your cues, even in the face of a chaotic melee.**
- 2. When walking your dog, or when playing with him at leash-free parks, carry some tool (umbrella, etc.) that you feel comfortable with and capable of using in case of an emergency. The tool you choose should be suited to the environment; pepper spray is not appropriate for use in dog parks, but perfect for defending yourself from the stray fighting dogs that wander in some urban neighborhoods.**

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Comments (1)

I recently had my dog move back into the family home with his female dog. His dog doesn't get along well with my three dogs, especially the female pit mix. They've had three major fights in the last week and my pit also turned on one of my other dogs. I tried the thumb up the rectum, and it seemed to work the first time but not thereafter. The fire extinguisher did nothing. Now three dogs and one human (me) are chewed up and waiting for the next fight. For now, I've separated my pit from the rest and she is staying in my bedroom with me for now, but this will not work as a permanent solution. Until the new dog came, the dogs all knew their positions and hadn't had more than a minor squabble in years. The new dynamic has ruined all that, and I don't know what to do about it. By the way, my other dogs are a shepherd mix and a Cocker mix (both males), while my dad's is a border collier/basset (or maybe Corgi) mix. I don't know if the breeds make a difference or the fact that they are all rescues, but I am worried about what to do in the future.

Posted by: chantel66 | March 26, 2014 9:20 PM