

Littermate Syndrome...what is it?

Littermate Syndrome (also known as Sibling Aggression or Littermate Aggression) is a non-scientific anecdotal term that refers to a whole host of behavioral issues that tend to present when canine siblings (Littermates) are raised in the same household beyond the normal 8 to 10 weeks of age, when puppies are usually placed in homes. Littermate syndrome is when two puppies from the same litter (or within 6 months of age) are raised in the same home and develop a bond with each other. This early bond to one another can cause dog on dog aggression in the future and prevent the puppies from bonding to you. Additionally, these two puppies can become so bonded that when they are separated from each other they can develop severe separation anxiety. Some people would be able to handle such a commitment of two puppies, but littermates can come with a whole set of challenges you may not be expecting.

Other behavioral issues that can develop are:

- The failure to learn simple commands because the focus on each other.
- Fearful to unfamiliar stimuli
- Fighting amongst each other later in life

Another issue is the lack of social skills that can develop when an owner believes that the pair playing only with each other covers their socialization needs. That philosophy is quickly disproved when the pups meet other dogs, especially those of different breeds with different play styles. An even more troublesome problem may occur with littermates of the same gender in the form of aggression toward each other as they enter adolescence and then adulthood—although this is certainly not always the case.

Littermate Syndrome - A Trainer's Perspective

Getting two dogs at the same time seems like a great idea. Dogs are social animals, and a dog who will be alone all day can easily turn to destructive behavior or become anxious. Two puppies can entertain each other and keep each other company. So, what's the problem with bringing home two puppies at once?

Professional trainers and responsible breeders will recommend **against** bringing home two puppies within six months of one another, let alone two from the same litter. While this sounds like a good plan in theory, in practice it often causes quite a bit of heartache and potentially some serious aggression trouble. What well-meaning owners often don't realize is training two puppies at once is not only much harder than focusing on just one, but the pups are very likely to become more bonded with each other than they are with their owner. Siblings can become so dependent on each other that they become a sort of security blanket for each other, sometimes to the point that, when separated, they experience extreme distress. Separating them to take one to vet, for example, can be a traumatic experience.

In addition to the problems one might expect with bringing home siblings such as double food and vet costs and double the potty-training work, new puppy owners need to focus on how the puppies will develop. Puppies' brains continue developing until they hit sexual maturity (and even a bit beyond that), and there's some convincing research out there that bringing two puppies home at the same time prevents one, or both, of the puppies from reaching his or her full potential.

Luckily for trainers, this topic has been researched extensively by people who know all about creating behaviorally sound puppies: **Guide Dog Organizations**.

In order to maximize the use of their volunteer puppy raisers, one Guide Dog Organization decided to try an experiment. Willing homes were given not one, but two puppies to raise, thereby doubling the number of puppies the guide dog organization could work with. Puppies born to these organizations are tested before being placed and are tracked throughout their growth and development.

What the organization found was startling. **Placing two puppies in the same household always caused at least one puppy to become temperamentally unsuitable for work, even when both puppies started off as perfect candidates.**

When two puppies are placed together, they learn to rely on each other. One of the puppies always becomes shy, even when both puppies started off as bold and outgoing. This is a HUGE problem, since it means that the shy puppy never reaches his or her potential. In fact, this was such a major issue that the guide dog experiment was quickly halted, and to this day Guide Dog Organizations only place one puppy at a time in puppy raisers' homes, even when the homes are highly experienced.

Other abhorrent and heart-breaking effects of Littermate Syndrome:

- The shy puppy becomes increasingly withdrawn and introverted and never reaches potential
- Often even the "bold" puppy turns out to be quite nervous and uncertain when separated
- The puppies often become incredibly co-dependent, exhibiting high anxiety when separated
- They often fail to bond to their human family as strongly as they otherwise would, if at all.
- At social maturity, these puppies may begin fighting with one another, often quite severely.

Can littermate syndrome be prevented?

Theoretically, yes, however it's so difficult as to be **nearly impossible** in practice. Remember, even experienced guide dog puppy raisers aren't expected to be able to prevent this issue from developing. At a bare minimum, the two puppies would need to be crated and cared for separately, including separate walks, training classes, and playtime with their owners. The puppies need to have more one-on-one time with their new owners than they have with each other, effectively doubling the work and negating any of the possible benefits (i.e. companionship) that they were adopted together for in the first place.

Bottom Line: we absolutely know that puppies do best when brought home separately. If you want multiple dogs, consider purchasing or adopting adult dogs who are already done developing instead or wait for at least 6 months (preferably 12 months) and then get another puppy. You will be amazed at how much easier training and raising the 2nd puppy will be having one that is already trained and knows the ropes!

Bringing a new puppy home is an amazing experience that will change your life, and there are breeders out there that don't think this is an issue and in fact some may even try and encourage you to take a littermate also. We are not one of those breeders. In my 10+ years of breeding, I have only **once** approved 2 littermates to go to the same home, but it was not without some major hesitation first. We believe in choosing the best situation for our puppies to be raised in after they leave our home and want them to succeed and thrive, that is why we do not typically allow more than one puppy to go into the home at the same time. We have several people that have come back to us a year later or more later and added a sibling from another litter and that we have no issues with.

Resources: K9behavioralservices.com, moderndogmagazine.com, offleashk9training.com