

B-10 PROTOCOL FOR DOGS WITH INTERDOG AGGRESSION

Interdog aggression can be highly variable, but it generally appears between 1 and 3 years of age and is more common between dogs of the same sex. This makes sense because interdog aggression generally focuses on issues of social status and control, which become apparent at social maturity (approximately 18 to 36 months of age in dogs). Interdog aggression can occur between dogs that are either unknown or known to each other. In the latter case it can be initiated by a young dog that is becoming socially mature or by the older dog that perceives the changing status of the younger dog.

Very few dogs are aggressive to other dogs because they never learned how to interact with them when they were young. Dogs focus primarily on the parent(s) and litter mates until they are 5 to 8 weeks of age, when they become very receptive to interaction with people. Puppies form hierarchies within the litter, and these social orders are maintained both by some agonistic behavior (posturing, vocalizing, and snapping) and by active and passive deference by the other pups (rolling on the back and urinating or looking away). The few studies of this issue indicate that these puppyhood hierarchies appear to have no association with the relative status of the animals when they reach social maturity. Hence they should not be associated with any interdog aggressions that are related to social status. It is conceivable (but probably rare) that some dogs that never see other dogs when they are puppies might have some problems relating to other dogs; however, these problems are often related to fear [see "Protocol for Treating Fearful Behavior in Cats and Dogs" and "Protocol for Dogs With Fearful Aggression"]. The majority of dogs that have problems with interdog aggression have a problem with relative social status and have had no untoward experiences as puppies.

Interdog aggression is not associated with sexual maturity (approximately 6 to 9 months of age), although there is a role for testosterone in interdog aggression. Testosterone, the male hormone that is greatly decreased by castration (the removal of the testicles), stimulates dogs to roam and mark with urine. These two behaviors take dogs into the path of other dogs, increasing the chances for a conflict about status or rank between two dogs that do not live in the same household. Testosterone also facilitates fighting: intact (non-castrated) male dogs react quickly, react to a higher level overall, and take longer to calm down. Castration greatly decreases roaming, urine marking, and fighting between dogs and appears effective in diminishing all of these behaviors in about 60% of all dogs with such problems. It is important to remember that all behaviors have learned components. The fact that a hormone facilitates the development of a form of aggression does not mean that diminishing that hormone will simply "fix" the problem. If a dog has exhibited a series of behaviors for a long time (e.g., years), that dog has learned about the behavioral patterns and his response. Accordingly, simply removing the hormones that help that response does nothing about the learned component. That is a role for behavioral modification.

The situation with intact (nonspayed) female dogs is not so simple. Hormonal cycling does not appear to facilitate aggression between female dogs in the same sense that testosterone facilitates aggression between male dogs; however, clients often report that many intact bitches experience "mood" changes before and during estrus (heat). Many bitches also experience changes in appetite and activity lev-

els during or preceding their heat cycles. If there were some mild status-related problems between the female dogs in the household, they might be exaggerated at such times. If there is an intact male dog in the house, he might become highly motivated to pursue one of the female dogs and further disrupt the social order. There are few in-depth studies of any association between female hormones and aggression, but available studies indicate that female hormones do not play a large role in interdog aggression.

Both male and female dogs are healthier if they are neutered. Not only do fewer infectious and cancerous problems related to the reproductive tract develop, but females, if spayed early, have a lower risk of mammary cancer. Furthermore, roaming can be fatal to a dog. No dog is a match for a car, and, in many areas, dogs are driven off private property by guns. Most communities and townships have "dog at large" ordinances that prohibit free-ranging, wandering dogs. This is safer for the dog and for people.

Dogs that react to unknown dogs generally do so for two reasons: they are either afraid or they perceive, with or without cause, that the other dog represents a social or hierarchical threat. Dogs that fear other dogs can be spontaneously afraid of them or be afraid because they have been attacked. These problems are addressed in the "Protocol for Treating Fearful Behavior in Cats and Dogs" and "Protocol for Dogs With Fearful Aggression."

Dogs that react as if there is a challenge about social status when there is none are reacting inappropriately and out of context. If there is a challenge (staring, hackling up, placing a paw on shoulders, growling, snarling, snapping) of any kind, a reaction might be appropriate, but it is important to remember that, as for people, rules apply to many normal social behaviors in dogs. If the approaching dog just stares at your dog and your dog lunges for the other dog's throat, refusing to let go even when the other dog is whimpering and has rolled over, your dog is not behaving appropriately.

Most interdog aggression occurs between housemates, and it occurs more commonly between same-sex housemates. It is not unusual for two dogs to have lived together harmoniously for 2 years before problems occur. These problems are not related to "inappropriate or incomplete early socialization" or because someone did something to the dogs. The development of these problems reflects the intrinsic change that all social animals experience when they become socially mature. The more common scenario for interdog aggression within a household involves the younger dog that was fine as a puppy but, now that it is becoming socially mature, challenges the older dog. Challenges to the other dog can include blocking access to a bed or crate; lying on the other dog on a couch; stealing the other dog's biscuits, rawhides, or toys; blocking the other dog's access to food, shoving past the other to get out or in a door or car first, and posturing in a ritualized display where the challenger approaches the other dog's shoulders in a perpendicular manner.

Challenges can involve staring, vocalizing, or outright aggression. Challenges may start with staring and escalate to aggression. Regardless, it is important to treat the problem as soon as it becomes apparent. The longer that it is allowed to persist, the worse the dogs' behavior will become.

A similar scenario can occur even if the younger dog is not challenging the older animal. In such cases the older dog begins to sense the change in the younger dog and spontaneously starts to react. Alternatively, the younger dog may try out some of the behaviors that develop with age (pushing

on another dog) and not be the least bit aggressive, but the older dog perceives the younger dog as a serious problem and becomes aggressive.

In general, the dog that is challenged responds in one of three ways: (1) it acts absolutely deferential and shows the other dog that it is not interested in holding a higher rank (rolling on its back and urinating, looking away, waiting for the other dog to be first at everything), (2) the dog fights back and wins or loses and that outcome is accepted by both dogs, or (3) both dogs jockey for status and each is unwilling to concede status to the other. In the last situation the aggression continues and may be prolonged, confusing, and dangerous. In the second situation the situation resolves, but the process of resolution is still potentially dangerous. Most behavior modification recommended for dogs with interdog aggression is derived from the first situation.

Much has been written about ranking dogs numerically and determining the "alpha" dog. Such paradigms usually fail in profound cases of interdog aggression because the situation is not that simple. Interdog aggression is associated with status relationships between dogs. These relationships are not absolute. They change with age and health status. The manifestations of the relationships can be affected by the people who are present and by how those people interact with the animals. Some relationships apply only to feeding and sleeping orders. Because dog hierarchies, like those of people, are not linear, the amount of aggression exhibited may depend on which dogs were where and when they were there. A dog that challenges one dog may not care about another dog in the household that, to all outward appearances, seems to act the same and be the same age and sex. Chances are they are not acting identically, and it is in the subtleties that the problems with the relationship occur.

Treatment of interdog aggression focuses on setting and maintaining a new social order. In general, reinforcement is given to the dog that is best able to maintain social status when this is contested in a fight. (Generally, but not always, the younger, the larger, and the more physically fit the dog is the more confident it is). Preferential treatment or attention reinforces that dog as the higher ranking dog. In some households in which the problem dog (C) attacks one dog (A) but mildly pushes around another dog (B), the dogs might respond to all being reinforced in a linear manner (A over B and C, B over C). How this is best done warrants some discussion, but two important cautions must be issued.

First, never physically punish these dogs. Doing so only raises their level of distress, and they may feel that they have to fight you. This reaction could manifest itself as fear, pain, or redirected aggression. None of these choices is good, and you could make a bad situation worse.

Second, if possible, never reach between two fighting dogs. Most people have good intentions and want to separate fighting dogs to prevent injury to them. If you place your body parts between the dogs, the dogs might accidentally mistake you for the other dog and injure you. When this happens, the dogs usually withdraw, but the damage is already done. Instead, if you know your dogs have a problem, watch them closely whenever they are together and keep cardboard, a broom, a bucket of water, a hose, or a blanket handy. These are all "remote-control" items that can be used to separate the dogs safely. In general, once the dogs are apart, they start to calm down and you can remove the aggressor. Removing the victim if the aggressor is unrestrained may enhance the helplessness of the victim to the aggressor. If no small children, high-strung people, or ner-

vous animals are in the house, a loud noise such as that generated by a foghorn can also help separate the animals. Remember that any animal that is injured is in pain and is frightened. These animals can bite without being malicious. Avoid this by transporting them by means of blankets and loose muzzles.

Checklist

- 1. First, separate all dogs involved in the interdog aggression at all times when unsupervised. This will not be difficult for interdog aggression involving dogs on the street but can be difficult within a household. If the aggressor can be identified, that dog should be confined to the less desirable room (a spare bedroom, rather than your bedroom; a pen in the heated, well-lit basement, rather than the kitchen where the dogs are fed). All other dogs should have free range. If more than one dog is actively problematic, the problem dogs should be confined and the nonproblem dogs can be left loose. If every dog is a problem, they should all be kept in crates where they cannot see each other or threaten each other.

If your dog reacts only to other dogs on the street, avoid them until you have completed "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program" and "Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Program Tier 1" and can begin "Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitizing and Counterconditioning a Dog (or Cat) From Approaches From Strangers." Always walk your dog on a head collar. At the first sign of any inappropriate behavior, ask the dog to sit and relax. Close the dog's mouth with the head collar. If the dog still reacts, turn it around immediately and ask it to sit and relax. If the dog still reacts, remove the dog from the situation as quickly as possible. Use the head collar to close the dog's mouth and lead it to a place where it can sit and relax.

- 2. Bell the dogs with different sounding bells. If they are loose you must be willing to supervise them. The bell will signal you when the aggressor is approaching and when the problem dogs are close together. The dogs can approach each other if and only if you are confident that you can control them from a long distance. If not, you have three choices:
 - a. Crate one or both dogs.
 - b. Keep one dog behind a baby gate.
 - c. Use harnesses or head collars on each dog and restrain them so that they cannot interact with each other.
- 3. Choose an order in which to reinforce the dogs. Hints about what will be most successful can be derived from the dogs' behaviors, as follows:
 - a. For example, you have two dogs and the younger one has begun to passively challenge the older dog; the older dog is snarling and most of the time the younger backs off. The older dog is larger and stronger than the younger dog, just as healthy, and not much older. Reinforce the older dog over the younger dog.
 - b. The older dog perceives a threat from the younger dog, but the younger dog is not actively challenging the older one. The older dog is weaker than the younger dog, and, although the younger dog is sweet, it is huge. Reinforce the younger dog.
 - c. The younger dog is actively challenging the older dog and is getting very aggressive. The older dog is fighting back and the younger one is meeting the

challenge. The older animal is arthritic and weaker, but the dogs are fairly evenly matched in size. It will break your heart, but reinforce the younger dog.

- d. One of the dogs perceives a challenge, and the other one does not seem to be bothered. The challenger is becoming more violent, but the recipient continues to actively and passively defer. The last time the challenged dog rolled over on its back and the other moved in for the kill. *Caution:* this is the problem scenario. Reinforce the challenged (deferential) dog. This may be very difficult to execute successfully, but if you cannot give this dog some status (regardless of whether it's the younger or older dog), it will be a terrific victim. Remember, these aggressions are inappropriate and out of context. *Do not assume that the dogs will not injure each other.* They can seriously disable or kill each other in such circumstances. If the dog that is deferential cannot hold its status, you must either keep the dogs continuously separated or find another home for one of the dogs. If you decide to place the challenger, that dog can go only to a home where it will be the only dog.

Reinforcing the chosen dog has active and passive components. First, separate them as discussed previously. Second, enforce higher status by feeding one dog first, letting it outside before the other dog, giving it a treat or toy first, walking it first, playing with it first, grooming it first, and so on. You can also have the dog sleep in a crate or on a bed in your room or on your bed (if you like this and the dog never growls at you while you are sleeping), whereas the other dog is banished to a room or crate outside your room. Each dog needs daily individual attention. The dog that is being reinforced should always get the attention first in the presence

of the other dog if this can be done quietly. If necessary, restrain the other dog with a harness. If you are walking the dogs as a group, make sure that the dog that is "out in front" is the dog that you are trying to reinforce.

- 4. Fit all dogs with Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collars or a harness, and gradually reintroduce them to each other when there is no attention being given. For example, watch television while they both sit quietly, secured at a distance where they can see each other but cannot lunge and connect. If the problem dog stares at the dog you are trying to reinforce, squirt it with a water pistol or a compressed air canister. If the dog that you are reinforcing stares at the other, ignore it if the other dog does not growl. If the other dog growls, use the air canister or water pistol. If the aggression intensifies, remove that dog and banish it. If the dog that you are reinforcing stares at the other dog and the other dog looks away, reward them both with food treats—that is exactly the behavior you are trying to reinforce.
- 5. Make sure that you have followed "Protocol for Defiance: Basic Program" and "Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Program Tier 1." The next phase focuses on desensitizing the dogs to each other. This is true whether your dog reacts to dogs within the household or to strange dogs on the street (see "Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitizing and Counterconditioning a Dog (or Cat) From Approaches From Strangers" and "Protocol for Introducing a New Baby and a Pet" [the principles are the same]).

Antianxiety medications may help some dogs that otherwise are unable to succeed in this program. Remember, if it is decided that medication could benefit your dog, you need to use it *in addition* to the behavior modification, not instead of it.