

## PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING DOGS WITH INTERDOG AGGRESSION

Interdog aggression—the global term for truly problematic aggression between dogs—can be highly variable, but it generally appears at social maturity (approximately 18 to 24 months of age in dogs; range: ~12 to 36 months). Changes in social relationships *also* occur in dogs *who are not affected by problem aggressions*, and these changes occur during this same developmental time period. During the period of social maturity all social animals experience huge upheavals in neurochemistry, so it is not surprising that this is when we fully appreciate truly problematic social interactions.

Interdog aggression is more common between, but not restricted to, dogs of the same sex. Interdog aggression appears to be about social relationships between the dogs and how the affected or aggressor dog perceives relative social status or role, and his control over that status/role.

Interdog aggression can occur between dogs who are unknown to each other and/or between dogs who are known to each other. When threats or fighting are seen in dogs who are *unknown* to each other, it is important to rule out two reasons for the fighting other than interdog aggression:

1. normal behavior, which may involve some posturing, especially as dogs get to know each other, and
2. problematic behavior involving fear or fear aggression.

Neither of these is our concern in this protocol. For fearful dogs see the **Protocol for Understanding and Treating Dogs with Fear/Fearful Aggression**.

### True Interdog Aggression

True interdog aggression usually involves household dogs who may have gotten along in the past without outright fighting, but who experience a profound change in their relationships as one or both of them moves through social maturity. The most commonly seen pattern may be the one where a young dog is becoming socially mature, and where the older dog is having difficulty with the accompanying behavioral changes and altered social behaviors shown by the younger dog.

### Roles for Development

Very few dogs are aggressive to other dogs because they never learned how to interact with them when they were young, although this can happen. The vast majority of dogs affected by interdog aggression have had experience with other dogs that has been good and normal. Most dogs displaying interdog aggression have been part of the household since they were puppies and their behaviors are reported to have changed.

Dogs focus primarily on their parents and littermates until they are approximately 5 to 8 weeks of age, at which point they become very receptive to interaction with people. Puppies form loose social groupings that have relatively predictable interactions within the litter, and these social groups and interactions are maintained both by some agonistic or forceful behavior (posturing, vocalizing, and snapping) and by active and passive deference by the other pups (rolling on the back with or without urinating, or looking away).

The few studies that have been done on puppy social behavior indicate that these puppyhood social patterns

appear to have no association with the relative interactions of the animals when they reach social maturity. Hence, these puppy patterns should not be associated with any later interdog aggression. It *is* conceivable (but probably rare) that some dogs who never see other dogs when they are puppies might have some problems relating to other dogs; however, these problems are often related to fear, not to the actual interaction with the other dogs. See the **Protocol for Understanding and Treating Dogs with Fear/Fearful Aggression** for information about these dogs.

The overwhelming majority of dogs who have problems with interdog aggression have a problem with changing social interactions and relationships, or in understanding these interactions, and have had no known untoward experiences as puppies. Most clients report that these dogs were “good” with the dogs with whom they are now fighting when younger, although we have very few detailed data about whether they were truly “good” or whether there were earlier problems that did not rise to the level of fighting. More detailed research will likely reveal some earlier problems with some aspect of signaling, communication or play ability that was misunderstood. The neurochemical shift that drives social maturity would make such problems worse.

### The Complex Issue of Sex

Interdog aggression is *not* associated with sexual maturity (~6 to 9 months of age), although there is a role for testosterone in some forms of interdog aggression and in normal contests between intact dogs.

Testosterone can stimulate dogs to roam and mark with urine. These two behaviors take dogs into the path of other dogs, increasing the chances for potential conflict between two dogs who do not live in the same household. Testosterone may also facilitate fighting: intact (entire/non-castrated) dogs react quickly, react at a higher level overall, and take longer to calm down. These types of fights are not usually seriously injurious fights, and some sparring may be normal behavior for intact male dogs who are following estrus females. However, if an intact male dog is affected with true interdog aggression, the testosterone may facilitate the aggression. People with intact male dogs should know of these concerns.

Castration (removal of the testicles) may greatly decrease roaming, urine marking, and fighting between dogs, and has been reported to diminish all of these in approximately 60% of all dogs with such problems. **However, it is important to remember that all behaviors have learned components.**

- Just because a hormone may facilitate the development of one form of aggression does not mean that diminishing that hormone will simply fix the problem.
- If a dog has been exhibiting a series of behaviors for a long time (i.e., years) that dog has learned about the behavioral patterns and his response.
- Simply removing the hormones that help that response does not affect the learned component.
- Use of behavior modification will be needed to alter the learned component and we use behavior mod to change how dogs respond to other dogs.

The situation with intact (entire/non-spayed) females is not so simple, and few good data have been collected.

- Hormonal cycling does not appear to facilitate aggression between females in the same sense that testosterone facilitates aggression between normal or problematic males; however, clients often report that many intact bitches experience “mood” changes prior to and during estrus (heat).
- Many bitches also experience changes in appetite and activity levels during or preceding their heat cycles. If there were some mild status- or communication-related problems between the females in the household, they might be exaggerated at such times.
- If there is an intact male in the house, he might become highly interested in one of the females, and further disrupt the social rule structure that has allowed everyone to peacefully co-exist.
- Finally, some females become more social and solicitous when in heat.

There are few studies that have looked in-depth at any association between female hormones and aggression, but those that have done so indicate that female hormones *do not* seem to play a large role in interdog aggression.

## Why Dogs React to Other Dogs

Dogs who react to *unknown dogs* generally do so for two reasons: they are either afraid of them or they act as if they perceive, with or without cause, that the other dog represents a social threat.

Dogs who are afraid of other dogs can be spontaneously afraid of them, or they can be afraid because they have been attacked, and may develop fearful behavior or fear aggression as sequelae. Co-morbidity of diagnoses should alert clients, veterinarians and handlers to ask which came first.

One function of any challenging or threatening behavior is to provoke a situation to learn if there is a risk to the individual displaying the behavior. *Dogs ask questions to gain information*, and one way they do so can involve a threat. Humans often misinterpret these aspects of canine signaling. We need to think about interpreting “dog behaviors” in terms of what they mean *for the dog*. A growl may be given to learn if the other dog will growl back or pick up a toy: the dog doing the growling clarifies the intent of the interaction by watching the response of the dog at whom he growled.

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

We can understand and help these dogs if we pay attention to the *context* of the interaction.

## The Common Versions of Interdog Aggression

Most reported interdog aggression occurs between housemates, and it occurs more commonly between same-sex housemates. Females are overrepresented in case studies of dogs with interdog aggression. It is not unusual for two dogs



The dog at the lower right is meeting the dog at the top of the photo for the first time. Her automatic response to new dogs is to threaten them. In her case, she does this to find out whether they will pose a risk to her. The dog at the top knows this, and gives the correct response: he stops and averts his gaze.

to have lived in relative harmony together for 2 years before there are problems. **These problems are not generally due to “inappropriate or incomplete early socialization” or to some abuse the dogs experienced.** The development of these problems reflects the intrinsic change that all social animals experience when they become socially mature.

One of the more common of the scenarios for interdog aggression within a household involves the younger dog, who was fine as a puppy, but now that he is becoming socially mature, new behaviors are tried out and what the older dog sees as “challenges” have become common. Normal dogs would not view such “challenges” as true threats and would negotiate the changes in the younger dog’s behavior as he moves from puppy-like behaviors, through more assertive and sometimes uncertain behaviors, through calm and mature behaviors that will characterize the dog as an adult.

Dogs who are the aggressors in interdog aggression have difficulty with these transitions. We now believe that it may be likely that the aggressor was never truly completely “normal” as a pup, and that there is a definite role for worsening behavior associated with changes in brain neurochemistry as the dogs move through social maturity.

Challenges can include:

- blocking access to a bed or crate,
- lying on or in front of a couch or chair (blocking access),
- them on the other dog,
- stealing the other dog’s biscuits, rawhides, or toys,
- blocking access to the other dog’s food,
- shoving past the other dog to get out or in a door or car first,
- using halls, doorways, and steps as situations to control the other dog and his access to areas or escape from them,
- ritualized displays, including where the challenger approaches the other dog nose to shoulder,
- staring,
- vocalizing (aggressive barks, snarls, growls), and
- frank aggression.

These behaviors can all occur alone or in combination, and may be self-limiting or can escalate within a few minutes to outright aggression with grabbing and biting.

It is important to treat the problem as soon as it becomes apparent. The longer that the problem is allowed to persist, the worse the dogs will get.

## Classic Presentations of Interdog Aggression

Some examples of classic presentations of interdog aggression will make clear the importance of four skillsets that normal dogs should possess: (a) reading signals correctly; (b) correctly processing/understanding the information in those signals; (c) make an appropriate plan based on the signals received, read, and processed; and (d) acting appropriately and signal an action or plan based on the original situation.

- One commonly seen version of interdog aggression involves a problematic younger dog who suddenly “challenges” the fairly normal dog in the contexts above. As a normal dog, the older dog does not wish to fight and tries to deescalate the situation by walking away from many of the situations. The younger dog continues to threaten the older dog, despite the fact that the older dog is always signaling that this is not necessary. Here we do not know if the younger dog can adequately read the social signals, or if he can understand and process the signals, or whether he can act appropriately on these signals.
- The older dog can be the aggressor and may be having difficulty with the behavioral changes associated with social maturity that the younger dog is exhibiting, despite any threats or challenges from the younger or new dog. Here the older dog read the signals correctly, but does not find the change of the pup into another adult acceptable.
- Sometimes the younger dog is just trying out some of the behaviors that develop with age (pushing on another dog), and may not be the least bit aggressive, but the older dog perceives the younger dog’s behaviors as a serious problem and becomes aggressive. Here the older dog is reading the signals within the broad context inappropriately.

It is likely that the specific pathology differs in all three of the above situations. Regardless, by managing the environment, working with behavior modification and using medication as needed, we can improve the lives for both the humans and the dogs in most situations. To do this, we need to understand the patterns to the extent possible.

Generally, regardless of age, the dog that is challenged responds in one of four ways:

1. She unambiguously displays deferential behavior and shows the other dog that she is not interested in fighting; for example, the challenged dog rolls onto her back and may urinate, looks away, waits for the other dog to give the next set of social signals and instructions.
2. The challenged dog fights back, “wins” or “loses,” and that outcome is accepted by both dogs.
3. Both dogs jockey for “status” and each is unwilling to concede status to the other. This means that fights continue to erupt and generally become more violent. Daily interactions may also contain more passive challenges.
4. One dog concedes to the other or pre-empts any aggressive behavior by offering deferential behaviors, but the other dog is still aggressive.

In situations 3 and 4, the aggression continues and may become prolonged, confusing, and dangerous.

The tricky situation is situation 4. Here, *the immediate aggression resolves, but the process of resolution is still dangerous because a pathological aggressor will ultimately not accept continued deferential behaviors from the other dog*—the aggressor wants the other out of the household.

Whether this is a response to an evolutionary pattern gone awry is unknown, but in free-ranging and wild dog groups, most males disperse at social maturity or help the related females in the group, and most females work closely socially with the females most related to them, often mothers, aunts, and cousins. Our living situation with our dogs does not consider this evolutionary pattern. Because our dogs do not grow up in their own extended family groups, the way we live with them may contribute to the pathology in susceptible dogs. Interdog aggression between dogs in the same household most often involves females, and this could be one reason why that is the case. That said, we have likely selected dogs over time to get along with others, and should recognize these problem behaviors, regardless of ultimate cause, as pathological.

Most people assume that when dogs fight they do so because one dog is pushy and just doesn’t respect the dog who is the “top dog.” *Please do not assume that this is so; to do so is the single most common error made in managing fighting dogs.* In fact, unless the aggression is transient and rare, this is likely *the exceptional situation*, and by thinking that dogs who fight are “normal,” you are probably putting your dogs at risk for injury or death.

## Identifying the Relative Aggressors and Victims

You can best learn whether your dogs fall into any of the scenarios, above, by following them around with a video camera and obtaining video on normal, daily interactions. In this way, patterns of association and space use will be clear. Videos allow you to share true behavioral data with your veterinarian, specialist and trainer so that you can get adequate help for your dogs. Once you understand which behaviors are normal and which are problematic you should be able to identify the relative victims (defensively aggressive dogs) and the relative aggressors (offensively aggressive dogs). Although most of the behavior modification could be helpful without correct identification of victims versus aggressors, you will be much more successful in preventing, anticipating and fixing problem interactions if you understand each dog’s relative role.

If you have more than two dogs, you may have an advantage in learning about the relationships between your dogs. A third dog often acts as a “mediator” dog.

- If you have a mediator dog, he will be watchful of the interactions of the other dogs.
- The mediator dog often chooses to accompany one dog; this tends to be the victim dog (the one who may be exhibiting defensive aggression).
- The mediator dog often physically comes between the aggressor and the victim, turning the victim away from any active or passive threats from the aggressor.
- The mediator dog often blocks the view of or access to the victim dog.

Dogs read dog signaling better than humans do. If you have one of these helpful and “supranormal” dogs in your household as a mediator, you are fortunate. She will help you to identify relative victims and aggressors and will provide guidance about whether the changes you have made are helping. If you are not sure whether one of your dogs plays this role, review photos and video of your dogs; you will often be able to see the protective behaviors discussed above in action.

Some mediator dogs are so good at what they do that you may not appreciate how hard they were working until they can no longer protect the victim. Do not be surprised if these dogs try to pull the aggressor from the victim if there is a true fight.

## Myths About Hierarchy, Dominance, and “Alpha”

Much has been written about ranking your dogs numerically, determining who is “alpha” and about “dominance.” Most misunderstanding about canine signaling and social systems would vanish if we realized that the commonly used description of “dominance” is *not* synonymous with any aggression, including “dominance”/impulse control aggression and interdog aggression. “Dominance” may not even be synonymous with hierarchical standing.

“Dominance” has been defined in the original scientific literature as an individual’s ability to maintain or regulate access to some resource. It is a description of the regularities of winning or losing contests over those resources, is not to be confused with status, and does not need to confer priority of access to resources. *Status, in contrast, is generally defined by the ease of frequency of engendering deferential behaviors from others.* It is important to keep labels separate from concepts. We often label dogs as “dominant” without giving any thought to the actual concept of dominance as it’s defined. We would do better by deleting these “loaded” terms from our vocabulary and instead discuss what the dog is actually doing. If the dog is pushy, say so; if the dog is able to quell disputes among dogs and is automatically deferred to by other dogs, just say so.

Paradigms involving such hierarchical judgments usually fail because they encourage adversarial relationships, but they *especially* fail in profound cases of interdog aggression.

*Interdog aggression is associated with relationships between dogs and their reactions—right or wrong—to threats and about the form of social interactions. These relationships between dogs are not absolute. They change with age, health, and, most importantly, context.*

The manifestations of these relationships can be affected by the people who are present and by how those people interact with their dogs. Some relationships apply only to feeding and sleeping orders. Because dog social relationships and organization, like those of people, are not linear, the amount of aggression exhibited may depend on which dogs were where when. A dog who challenges one dog may not care about another dog in the household who, 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.

## Aggression as an Anxiety Disorder

Dogs who exhibit out-of-context or inappropriate responses to other dogs actually suffer from anxiety disorders: They cannot adequately assess the risk associated with the other dog and so provoke the situation in an attempt to get more information or to preempt any challenges.

Obviously, such out-of-context threats are not viewed favorably by most other dogs, who learn that the dog threatening or attacking them is unreliable. *With repeated exposure to aggressive interactions, both dogs in the interaction become more anxious and reactive and, often, more aggressive.*

A perfectly normal dog can become the aggressor if he perceives that the only way to not be hurt is to stop the other dog before the attack occurs. This is why it is so important to get as much information as possible about the way the dogs interacted over time.

## Treating These Problematic Relationships

Treatment of interdog aggression focuses on setting and maintaining a new set of social relationships that will *relieve everyone’s uncertainty and, most importantly, keep everyone safe.*

Generally, “reinforcement” is given to the dog who is best able to contribute to a stable social environment by behaving most appropriately, given the context. This may be the younger, the larger, the more physically fit, the more confident dog, but it certainly does not have to be this dog. If you have a “mediator dog,” he will identify the dog behaving most appropriately for you: This is the dog the mediator dog is protecting and for whom he is running interference.

Some important cautions must be issued about working with these dogs:

- Never physically punish these dogs. All you will do is to raise their level of distress, and they might feel that they have to fight you off. Their reaction to punishment could be fear, pain, or redirected aggression. None of these are good choices, and you could make a bad situation worse.
- If at all 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 that you have a problem with your dogs, watch them carefully any time they are together and keep cardboard, a broom, a bucket of water, a hose, a full, unopened bottle of seltzer or club soda, or a blanket handy. These are all “remote control” items that you can use to separate the dogs safely. If no small children, high-strung humans, or nervous animals are in the house, a loud noise, like that generated by a foghorn, may also help to separate the animals, but this will usually only work once. **Screaming by humans—particularly by young humans—will worsen the situation.**
- Generally, once the dogs are apart they start to calm down and you can remove the aggressor to a neutral spot behind a closed door. Removing the victim if the aggressor is unrestrained may enhance the helplessness of the victim in the eyes of the aggressor.
- Remember that any injured animal hurts and is frightened. These animals can bite you without being malicious. Avoid

this by transporting injured dogs using blankets and loose muzzles if they need veterinary care.

- Disregard all common myths about the “dominant” dog and “dominance,” and, instead, watch the dogs to learn which dog is behaving most appropriately, given the context. Then, *reward the dog behaving most appropriately given the circumstances*, regardless of breed, sex, age, physical condition, or size. You may wish to read the following online position statements by members of groups devoted to humane behavioral care for pet dogs: [www.avsonline.org/avsonline/images/stories/Position\\_Statements/dominance%20statement.pdf](http://www.avsonline.org/avsonline/images/stories/Position_Statements/dominance%20statement.pdf), [www.dogwelfarecampaign.org](http://www.dogwelfarecampaign.org) ([www.dogwelfarecampaign.org/why-not-dominance.php](http://www.dogwelfarecampaign.org/why-not-dominance.php)).

## Basic Treatment Tick List

### When Outdoors:

1. Only walk dogs together on leads who can get along. A lead automatically prohibits an anxious dog from leaving and victims of interdog aggression can be further victimized when they are constrained to stay close to the aggressor while on lead.
2. If you are walking the dogs as a group, make sure that if there is a dog that is “out in front” that dog is the one whose right to exist in an unmolested manner you are trying to reinforce. You do not want to be accidentally rewarding a walking order that the dogs understand to be associated with threats to one or more dogs.

Under normal circumstances dogs should not need to care about who is in front of whom. If you are having these types of struggles on walks, your canine household has issues that need to be addressed. If you are unsuccessful in gently requesting that the pushier dog step back, consider some trial separations of the dogs to see if one dog blossoms when not harassed. If this happens, you need to work with the situation immediately.

Remember that in anxiety-related conditions, like interdog aggression, many of the provocative behaviors are exhibited to gain information, and that part of the pathology may be that the dog is incapable of interpreting the response in all but the worse light for the victim. Also, abnormal dogs may misinterpret the behavior of a dog who pulls out in front of the others: to the normal dog, such behavior may just indicate that the dog is following a scent; to an abnormal dog the dog who pulled out in front may be seen as a deliberate threat.

If you must walk dogs together and you have a “mediator dog,” that dog should be between the victim and the aggressor.

3. If the dogs are traveling in the car, the aggressor must be gated in the far back of the car or crated in the back. The other dogs should be in seatbelts or crates in more forward regions of the car. You may need to cover the aggressor’s crate or gate if he takes the opportunity of being close to them to stare at the other dogs.
4. If your dog only reacts to other dogs on the street, avoid the other dogs until you have completed **Protocol for Deference** and **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1** and can begin **Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitizing and Counter-Conditioning a Dog (or Cat) from Approaches from Strangers**.

5. If possible, always walk your aggressor dog on a head collar, not a harness. At the first sign of any inappropriate behavior, ask the dog to sit and relax. Using the head collar, close the dog’s mouth. If the dog still reacts, turn him around immediately, and ask him 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 him to a place where he can sit and relax. This will help whether your dog reacts to unfamiliar dogs on the street or the dogs with whom he is being walked. Please remember that dogs who only react to unfamiliar dogs can redirect their aggression to these dogs to others with whom they are walked. A head collar is the simplest all-around preventive solution. See the **Protocol for Choosing Collars, Head Collars, Harnesses, and Leads** for suggestions.
6. If your dog threatens or attacks dogs outside of the household on the street be aware that *this response may not be associated with interdog aggression—the response may be associated with fear*. Please discuss this possibility with your veterinarian. Automatically assuming that all dogs who show aggression to other dogs are either normal or nasty condemns dogs who are uncertain or fearful to a life of never getting the help they need.

### When Indoors

1. Keep all dogs involved in the interdog aggression separated at all times when not supervised. Keeping unknown dogs on the street separate is easy. Keeping dogs separate within a household is difficult and requires thought, tangible plans, and possibly a written map or floor plan. If you are able to identify the dog who is the aggressor, confine the aggressor to the less-desirable room (a spare bedroom; a pen in the heated, well-lit basement or garage). All other dogs should have free range. If more than one dog is actively problematic, all the problem dogs should be confined, and the non-problem dogs can be left loose. If everyone is a problem, they should all be kept in crates where they cannot see each other or threaten each other.
2. Bell the dogs with different sounding bells that you can distinguish (Bear Bells: [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com)). If you cannot distinguish the sounds, bell only the aggressor. The bell will tell you when the aggressor is approaching and when the problem dogs are close together. The dogs who have been victimized by the aggressor can also use the bell to monitor the aggressor’s movements and avoid interaction. Dogs who are having problems with each other can have a chance to approach each other *if and only if* you are confident that you can control them long-distance, and prevent any injury. Please remember that injury can be physical or behavioral. Of these, the behavioral injury may be worse for many dogs who learn to live in constant terror. If you do not feel that you can adequately monitor the dogs when loose, or that you cannot read the dogs’ signals well enough to relax, that’s fine. You now have three choices:
  - a. one or both dogs are crated,
  - b. one dog is behind a baby gate, and
  - c. the dogs are each on harnesses or head collars and restrained so that they cannot get to each other.
 Again, please remember that dogs who are separated but who are staring at each other are not “mentally” separated. The dog who is being threatened can be trapped

by crates, gates, and leads. Do not let this happen. These dogs can only be together under the conditions listed above if neither one of them visually or physically threatens the other. Also, if a dog is afraid of crates or cannot exhibit normal behaviors when in them, please do not crate that dog. Feeling entrapped makes such dogs more anxious and reactive and will worsen your situation.

3. Choose an order in which to reinforce the dogs based on identifying which dog is behaving the most appropriately. **Remember that reinforcement is not about rewarding the pushiest, most “dominant” dog.** It’s about rewarding the dog who is most appropriate so that all the dogs get the message that obnoxious/abnormal behaviors are not rewarded, but calm, nonthreatening ones are. This type of reward-based reinforcement works because it mimics canine social systems and uses deferential behaviors to get attention and other “currencies.” When reinforcing the most appropriate dog, feed that dog first, give her attention first, give her access to the yard first, et cetera. You can get hints about what will be most successful from the dogs’ behaviors, as follows:
  - a. For example, you have two dogs and the younger one has begun to passively challenge the older, the older is snarling, and most of the time the younger backs off. The older one is larger and stronger than the younger, just as healthy, and not that different in age. Reinforce the older over the younger. The younger dog here is likely normal, but just too pushy, and can learn how to have a better relationship with his companion once the threats subside.
  - b. The older dog perceives a threat from the younger, but the younger isn’t really doing anything active. The older is weaker than the younger, and although the younger is sweet, she is huge. Reinforce the younger dog and make sure that the older receives needed attention, including tasks he can still accomplish, so that the shift in relative social relationships is more fluid. The younger dog is actually behaving the most appropriately of the two dogs, and if you work with both dogs the older dog can learn that she is not a threat. You cannot reward the older dog because then you would be telling him that his out-of-context aggressions—and his perception that he must exhibit such aggressions—are acceptable when they are not. Please remember the role of exercise in reactivity: If the younger dog is not getting enough aerobic exercise she will be a brat, and pester the older dog. One solution here would be to find a play group of young, rambunctious dogs for the younger dog so that she is tired when she comes home to her older companion.
  - c. The younger dog is actively pushing around or challenging the older and is becoming very aggressive. The older is fighting back and the younger is meeting the challenge. The older is arthritic, and weaker, but the dogs are fairly evenly matched in size. It will break your heart, but reinforce the younger dog and see what happens. If the younger dog then recalibrates her response to the older dog, you’ll be fine. If the younger dog is normal and just provoking the social system around her as part of the social learning that occurs as dogs (and humans) enter social maturity, the younger dog will become less aggressive. *However, if the older dog does not respond to the aggression of the younger dog with another aggressive threat and the younger dog continues to threaten, you have a problem.* This behavior is abnormal and out-of-context, and the time to deal with it in the manner discussed in this handout for true aggression is *now*. Again, remember to meet the older dog’s mental, physical, and behavioral needs, even if it means changes in your behavioral interactions.
- d. One of the dogs—regardless of age—perceives a challenge and exhibits behaviors consistent with deferential or disengaged behaviors (e.g., turning the head or neck away, ceasing motion or other activity, turning the body away, displaying the ventral neck or the groin, tucking the tail, et cetera), but the aggressor/challenger doesn’t seem to care. The last time the challenged dog rolled over on her back the other dog moved in for the “kill,” and attacked the more passive dog’s belly and neck. **CAUTION: This is the true problem scenario, and it is almost always misunderstood and mishandled!** Reinforce the challenged (deferential) dog. This may be very difficult to execute successfully, but if you are not able to give this dog some status (regardless of her age) so that the aggressive dog realizes that this dog has a right to exist, she will be a terrific victim. *Remember that it is abnormal to respond to a deferential behavior with a threat. By definition, aggression that occurs when the recipient is signaling that they are not a threat is inappropriate and out-of-context. DO NOT ASSUME THAT THE DOGS WILL NOT INJURE EACH OTHER.* These dogs can seriously disable or kill each other in such circumstances. If the dog that is deferring cannot hold the “status” in a way that encourages the aggressive dog to back down—and she may be doing everything right—you will either have to keep the dogs continuously separated or find one of the dogs another home. If you decide to place the challenger, that dog can only go to a home where he will be the single dog. You do not know if this dog will behave in the same manner to another dog in a new home, but in the interest of the welfare of all of the dogs you should assume that this could be the case and minimize the cost of error.
4. Reinforcing the chosen dog has active and passive components. First, separate them as discussed above. Second, enforce the concept that the dog being threatened has the right to exist by feeding him first, letting him out before the other dog(s), giving him a treat or toy first, walking first, playing with him first, grooming him first, et cetera. Make sure you understand what is really being said here—this is **not** about “dominance.” It’s actually about providing a clear set of rules that provide information about which dog should serve as the model for the other dogs’ behaviors. Because misunderstandings are so injurious to dogs, a short discussion about what “status” means is warranted.
  - a. **You are not imposing a “rank” order on these dogs:** instead, you are encouraging the normal types of social deference that would be exhibited by dogs under normal conditions. Unfortunately, myths about dog-dog relations are so ingrained that we have come to believe that dogs seize control and force others to wait for them. Nothing could be more wrong. By reinforcing



A common pattern of wounds resulting from interdog aggression involving another dog in the household.



As the aggression intensifies, aggressors also focus on the victim's chest and neck.

- an appropriately behaved dog you encourage the normal fluidity of the social system and can then reward the aggressive dog for not reacting.
- b. You can also more passively encourage the aggressor to understand that the victim has some status by allowing the victim to sleep in a crate in your room, on a bed there, or on your bed (if you like this and the dog never growls at you while you are sleeping), while the other dog is banished to a room or crate outside your room. This has nothing to do with beds and “spoiling” and everything to do with the fact that access to preferred spots or to attention is a currency for dogs.
  5. Regardless of how you decide to work with the dogs, 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 and without threats or overt aggression. If necessary, restrain the inappropriate dog using a harness.
  6. Fit all dogs with a head collar, or a good no-pull harness, and gradually reintroduce them to each other when there is no attention being given. For example, watch TV while they both sit quietly, secured at a distance where they can see each other, but not lunge, and connect. If the dog that has been problematic stares at the dog you are trying to reinforce, gently turn his head away from the other dog and toward you so that he can take his cues from you. If the dog that you are trying to reinforce stares at the other, ignore her if the other dog doesn't growl. If the other dog does growl, interrupt the dogs by asking them to look at you. If this does not work, or if the aggression intensifies, remove the most aggressive dog and banish him. If the dog that you are trying to reinforce stares at the other dog and the other dog looks away, reward them both with food treats—that is exactly the type of fluid and flexible behavioral relationship you are trying to reinforce.
  7. Make sure that you have followed **Protocol for Deference**, the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**, and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**. The next phase will focus on desensitizing the dogs to each other. This will be true whether your dog reacts to dogs within the household or to strange dogs on the street (see **Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitizing and Counter-Conditioning a Dog or a Cat from Approaches from Strangers** and **Protocol for the Introduction of New Pets** [the principles are the same]).

In this world view, *treatment is about both understanding the neurochemical changes that occur with learning and repeated exposure, and about becoming more humane*. To do this, we must begin to see the world from the dog's point of view, which minimally requires that we let go of labels that may say more about us and our need, than they do about the behavior. The situation with interdog aggression demonstrates why we need to be more mindful of terminology, issues, and approaches that can inadvertently do more harm than good.

Antianxiety medications may help some dogs who otherwise are not able to succeed in this program, and are routinely required for serious aggression. Please remember that if it's decided that medication could benefit your dog, you need to use it **in addition** to the behavior modification, not instead of it.