

Female-Female Housemate Aggression

Competent applied behavior professionals have the technology to modify many kinds of dog to dog aggression: leash reactivity, overly rough play, bullying during play, and even fearfulness of other dogs. We can improve all these issues, especially if the dog doesn't deliver serious injuries when s/he fights.

There are a couple of problem types, however, where we don't currently have good techniques. One of these is gameness (dedicated selective breeding for strong propensity to fight), and the other is the pattern of escalating frequency and severity of fights between female housemates.

What Is Female-Female Housemate Aggression and What Can I Do?

The usual presentation is two females who have lived successfully together – even played and had a good relationship – devolving over time from occasional normal clean squabbles (e.g. over resources) to a pattern of unpredictable, un-triggered fights that happen more and more often, and are more and more serious in terms of the injuries to one or both dogs. The most common onset is when the younger of the two females reaches social maturity (between ages one and three years).

Normally bite pressure (“acquired bite inhibition” or ABI) during fights in dogs is stable: if a dog inflicts no injuries or minor dings when s/he fights, this pattern is static throughout the dog's life. But in the syndrome of female housemate aggression, this rule breaks down and the fights get gradually more serious, sending one or both dogs to the veterinarian for full-on medical care. There is no known way to change ABI in adult dogs, including the deteriorated ABI in female-female housemate aggression. What this means is that future fights will trend towards greater and greater damage.

Nobody knows why certain female housemates end up in this pattern, though unscrupulous trainers may confidently declare they know what drives it. These same trainers may also claim to be able to modify it, and this is dangerous and unethical, as there is not currently, given the stakes (severe injuries), a responsible solution other than carefully managing the affected dogs so that they do not have opportunities to aggress. Some guardians are willing to use muzzles, gates and crates and so on so that they can keep both dogs, whereas others elect to place one of the combatants in an only-dog situation or with a friendly male. Female-female aggression is not predictive of other problems. In other words, such dogs are not at elevated risk for aggression towards humans or other dog-dog issues. They just can't live with another female dog.

If you suspect you have two females that are developing this problem, seek a qualified applied behavior professional. Be very selective. Dog training is currently unregulated in most countries, which means anyone can advertise and take cases without any education or certification.