

Multi Dog Households:**The Headaches and Heartaches of Living with Dogs Who Do Not Get Along**

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When it comes to our beloved Cavaliers, most of us have heard the statement, “you can’t have just one.” Most Cavalier owners go from having just one to a house filled with grandparents, aunts, and cousins! For many, they become a can’t-live-without lifelong passion. Known for their reliable, loving, and giving temperament, they induce us into wanting and having more. Add a spice of spunk and sportsmanship and they make a well-rounded companion for young and old, active or inactive, urban or country living.

But even our “comfort spaniels” can have their moments. As rare as it is in the Cavalier, consistent and unexplained aggression, fear, or shyness cannot be ignored, and enlisting the help of a Certified Dog Training or Canine Behavior Consultant is imperative. The quality of the life of the dog is compromised as these affect the emotional and physical health of the dog.

Aggression, as defined in Roger Abrantes book, *The Evolution of Canine Social Behaviour*, is:

The initiation of unprovoked hostilities

The launching of attacks

Hostile behavior. (1)

These behaviors can show themselves for multiple reasons: poor breeding, illness, pain, neglect, lack of socialization, or mistreatment. However, they are rarely seen among even the poorest Cavalier specimen. If any of these traits are exhibited, a serious look has to be given to the evaluation of the dog. Fortunately for our Cavaliers, though, it seems that even if confirmation, health, or socialization has been compromised, the Cavalier’s sweet temperament almost constantly remains true to the standard. According to the American Kennel Club, the Cavalier is, “gentle and affectionate” with a “happy temperament.” (2)

But as sweet as these little spaniels are, it is not unusual to see problems develop in multiple-dog households. “Everything was fine until all heck broke loose” is a common statement among owners of multiple dogs. Upon evaluation, it will be found that a history of tension, anxiety, or irritation had been building, sometimes unbeknownst to the owner. That’s why the squabble may seem more intense than the precipitating trigger; the dogs have just reached their boiling point. Often the dog that gets labeled the instigator was only responding to the “stink eye” from the perceived victim. We may believe that the victim was “attacked” but, if the truth were known, he was the instigator. Covert looks and stares among the dogs often happen when we are not looking. Be careful not to jump to conclusions!

Explore any opportunity you can find to increase space between two rivals instead of asking the dogs to tolerate each other within a given space. Look for situations and environmental triggers. Evaluate the distance needed for tolerance; record the

frequency, intensity, and duration of the squabble. If you can answer those questions, you probably have the answer to “why don’t they get along?”

Resource Guarding

Skirmishes or aggressive outbursts over resources are not considered a result of an unsound temperament, emotional instability, or unstable environment. Remember, aggression is defined as an unprovoked attack. Guarding of resources is not an act of aggression; it is a natural act for survival. As in a household of kids, there is going to be friction, and most of it will revolve around the word “MINE!” However inconvenient and frustrating, not getting along with other dogs in the house does not fall within the seriousness of aggression unless there are, of course, injuries.

Resource guarding or MINE! Can be defined as anything the dog has and does not want to share or give up and/or anything another dog has that he wants. This usually progresses starting with food, then toys, to territory, and eventually to resource guarding of humans. Since it is a progressive phenomenon, it is important to be alert to the first sign of resource guarding and even more important to teach the dog early in your relationship that you are not there to “take things away” but “to give to them.”

To counter the “it’s mine” mentality, play the trade game. We have all been in a tug o’ war, with a dog’s jaws clamping harder and harder as he refuses to give up the cherished forbidden object. The trade game can be taught to both puppies and older dogs. You teach the dog “what I have is better than what you have.” Get the highest valued treat possible and place it a few inches to the side of the dog’s mouth (so he has to turn his head away from your hand to get the new treat); this keeps you from being bitten while reaching for the dropped object as the dog’s mouth is now away from your reaching hand. The treat has to be high enough value for him to let go; otherwise, you have taught him to hang on even tighter. Then when it is really important, you have a greater chance to get the dead bird or the piece of chocolate. What we have to teach the dog is to willingly relinquish an item in the knowledge that something even better will be offered. We are giving, not taking away. Never use alpha rolls or any aversive techniques. Occasional squabbles in a multiple-dog household are generally considered as a management issue.

Management

Most Cavaliers love other Cavaliers, so if there are issues, look for the trigger: RESOURCE COMPETITION. Once you have identified the resource, then you can MANAGE the dog’s environment.

- Remove, toys, bones, food, mats, purses--anything that they may perceive or want to claim as theirs.
- Management is especially critical if you are living with both males and females. A bitch in heat can create a life-or-death mentality in a stud dog. The owner has to be vigilant in keeping him away from not only the girls but the other males as well.

- If your Cavalier sleeps with you and growls when moved, it is time for him to sleep in the crate.
- Management means feeding dogs in their individual crates.
- Utilize a crate and rotate protocol for those who have a tendency not to get along. This reduces stress for both you and the dogs.
- Pet gates are helpful as well, but if a dog prefers being on the covered deck while another stays in mom and dad's closet, that is fine too as long as they are separated. This is a key: it is easy to establish a group management mentality and forget about individual personalities and needs.

What Else Could Be Triggering Squabbles Other than Resources?

Temperament! Like a lot of humans, some dogs just need more space emotionally and physically. It is important in a household with two or more dogs that each dog have a private place he can call his own and can go to at will. Dogs who can make choices in their environment are less anxious as well. Be aware if you have a social butterfly or one who is content to just be in your lap or on the chair away from the fray. Help provide them an environment where they can achieve the natural homeostasis that matches their temperament. Some are easily over stimulated and need to be removed to a quiet place, especially when children are up and running around, and some just naturally are the class clown, getting in all kinds of mischief.

An improper introduction can cause lasting tensions between dogs. If dogs were not introduced on neutral territory (i.e., the new dog was brought into the family dog's home), the chances are great that the family dog will have tension with the newcomer. This negative first impression is a difficult situation to rectify.

McConnell and London have some practical ideas in their very short and simple book, *Feeling Outnumbered? How to Manage and Enjoy Your Multi-dog Household*.

The authors suggest:

- Working with each dog individually, daily if possible but at least a few times a week.
- Teaching a group name, whatever comes to mind easily. Teach them to stop and focus on you when they hear something like, Listen Up! As they stop and look at you, hand out treats!
- Making sure each dog knows his or her individual commands and not just the group command.
- Appropriate behaviors should be practiced individually. Problem behaviors such as barking en masse to the front are difficult to rectify in a group. (3)

Aversive Techniques or Punishment

Some dog trainers and owners still believe the myth and practice establishing an alpha dominance with their dogs. Generally, this is done using aversive techniques such as alpha rolls, squirt water bottles, pennies in a can, a pop on the nose, e-collars, prong collars, or leash popping. Aversive techniques can only harm the human-canine relationship. An emotionally sound dog learns that his caretakers and

environment are trustworthy and predictable; aversive techniques teach the opposite. If aversive techniques have been used, you run the risk of making a reactive dog more reactive, a fearful or anxious dog more fearful or anxious, and a resistant dog more resistant.

Teach an appropriate behavior instead of punishment. As biddable as a Cavalier is, it wouldn't take much, especially if you add a treat! Ask yourself what you want your Cavalier to do instead of bark, lunge, snap, or growl. Teaching the appropriate behavior will alleviate the problem in a more positive way. The use of an aversive technique often has a natural consequence of creating more unwanted negative behaviors.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) recommends that "training should focus on reinforcing desired behaviors, removing the reinforcer for inappropriate behaviors, and addressing the emotional state and environmental conditions driving the undesirable behavior. . . . Trainers should be encouraged to work to change the underlying *cause* of the problem behavior and not just address the behavior at face value." (4)

Correction and Re-direction

So often we tell the dog what not to do but we don't teach them what we want them to do. The training formula involves both correction and redirection! For example; Don't jump, do sit, treat! Voila!

Therapy

Walk! For dogs that don't get along, take them on walks! You need one handler per dog, keeping the dogs on the outside. Do this for a week or two. If tensions are reducing between the dogs at home, alternate to a dog-handler-dog-handler formation. If they have resolved their issues at home, then you can walk them side-by-side. Do not let them visit or mark over each other. This is not "I am bigger than you" conversation; this is a power walk. After a few weeks if this is not reducing the tension, stop and just walk them separately. If nothing else is accomplished, a tired dog is a happier dog.

- Play with them separately.
- Have lesson time separately.

Recommendations:

- When playing ball, have one more ball than the number of dogs playing.
- Feed all bones and treats in individual crates.
- Feed all meals in crates. This reduces a main daily stressor and the likelihood that dogs will feel the need to guard their food. Feeding a few feet apart is not enough. Anxiety can generalize from one stressor to another, so eliminate any opportunities for it to start.
- Put everyone on a schedule, just as you would for a baby. For example, schedule nap time from 10-12 in the mornings and then from 2-3 in the

afternoons. This breaks up the group mentality and gives everyone space and time to settle. Multiple breaks can keep tempers from rising and give time to settle.

- Dog bowls and food: teach that an incoming hand is not a threat. Practice dropping treats into his food bowl as you walk by, picking it up while he is eating, and trading for something more delicious, such as chicken. In a house where there are children or grandchildren, this exercise is a must!
- Where the dog's head is, so is his brain. If he is looking at his so-called nemesis or reactive trigger, he is not focused on you. Interrupt with a clap and a NO! Request a refocus on you and praise.
- Never allow two dogs to stare at each other or one to stare at an unknowing suspect. That is a precursor to the prey drive, i.e., a fight. Correct with a clap to startle and a No! Redirect with a refocus on you, and praise.
- Observe calming signals as defined in the book *On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals* by Turid Rugass. She describes 30 calming signals that dogs use to communicate what they are feeling, such as stress or anxiety. This is a nonverbal signal to remove the dog or to change his environment. (5)

SUMMARY

Even though the Cavalier has a tranquil and tractable nature, this does not mean a multiple-dog household will be stress free. Some dogs just need more space; others do not like to share, want to eat in privacy, or are jealous of attention. When romance is in the air, tensions for both owners and dogs can rise; the key is management! Most skirmishes revolve around a resource, food, toys, territory, or a prospective mate.

Cavaliers may have discriminating owners, but few have discriminating taste; even though they prefer other Cavaliers they generally are social to all well-behaved dogs. All resource preferences are normal and fall under the category of "management." The AVSAB emphasizes that management over training is the first step in handling these types of situations. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers is an excellent resource (apdt.org). Establish a Management and Correct and Redirect as your training protocol.

Just like living in a household with multiple personalities and needs, we still have to learn to get along, i.e., family etiquette. Be careful not to project your values onto the dog; if you remember that "the behavior is indicative of the emotional state," that is, if your Cavalier is relaxed and seems happy to be by himself, then he probably is content, but if he is constantly on the attack or retreat or is easily aggravated, something needs to be changed in his environment. For the sake of the entire household, the other dogs and humans alike, enlist some help.

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