

Redirected Aggression

By Michelle Posage, DVM



Fools rush in. Consider this the next time you are faced with the problem of two pets fighting with each other.

One of the most common human injuries reported to me as a veterinary behaviorist is the type of bite that occurs while attempting to separate two fighting dogs. Sadly, many of these bites are entirely preventable since this form of aggression is not usually directed at humans unless they willingly become participants in the battle.

It is understandable to want to referee a loud, vicious-looking fight between two beloved pets. Most dog fights look and sound awful. As a bystander, it seems likely that one or both dogs is going to be seriously injured unless someone steps in. Ironically, it is more often the human that is injured than the pets.

These human bite wounds are the result of a type of behavior called redirected aggression. This is the terminology used by veterinary behaviorists when the focus of an attack is different than what provoked the aggression in the first place.

The same thing happens with people. Imagine having a fight at home with your spouse just before getting in the car to drive through rush-hour traffic. The driver who impolitely cuts in front of you may get a bigger dose of your own aggression simply because he is there and your spouse is not.

Likewise, the hand that pulls an adrenaline-pumped dog away from its intended target is likely to become the new bulls-eye. So my best advice to anyone witnessing a fight between two dogs is to pause before rushing to help. In my experience, injuries between animals, do occur, but certainly not as frequently as they occur to the people involved.

After you have taken a few seconds to size up the situation, consider the following methods of safe intervention if you deem it necessary.

- **Get involved early.** The best way to deal with a fight is to end it before it becomes physical. Study your pet's body language to recognize the beginning phases of a fight. For most dogs this means staring and tenseness.
- **Create a distraction.** A popular technique that everyone seems know is dousing the dogs in water. This may break up a mild fight that was likely to end on its own, but a more successful technique is blowing an air-horn. This hand held horn emits such a loud, startling noise that most dogs will stop fighting long enough for their owners to separate them.
- **Use protective gear.** A couch cushion, a chair, or a blanket is far preferable to using your hands when stopping a dog fight. Breaking the line of vision by throwing a blanket over your dog's head will at least provide a pause in the fighting.
- **Use a drag line.** When dogs are clashing frequently, extra control is needed. Keep a light-weight leash attached to your dog's collar when you are home. It can be used to pull your dog out of a brawl. Just make sure to remove the leash before leaving your dog unsupervised since it can be a potential choking hazard.
- **Use basket muzzles.** When used properly, basket muzzles can be a humane preventative tool. Avoid muzzles that clamp the mouth shut. These muzzles will prevent panting and cause overheating when used for more than a few minutes. Seek the help of a veterinarian to find the right type of muzzle and learn how to train your dog to wear it willingly.

Fighting pets is one of the most common types of behavior problems seen by veterinary behaviorists. A favorable outcome can be achieved with careful management, behavior modification, and sometimes medications. Left untreated, canine sibling rivalry can escalate into a more serious problem. Finding help early can prevent injuries both to pets and people.

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