

Learn to Manage Multiple Dog Animosity

An expert answers canine behavior questions.

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Q. I have a good number of dogs that are the "unadoptables" from a shelter. They are all wonderful and mostly obedient, but they fight over food and my attention constantly. The commands they know as individuals are lost when they are together. Is there any way to correct this, or do I have to just live with it?

A. What lucky dogs to find someone so caring and kind. I am not sure how many dogs you have, and I have been in the field too long to guess. I also do not know the ratio of males to females, which will impact their behavior. The other factors are background, which we do not have on these dogs-whether past lack of food, competition for resources or abuse are factors influencing their behavior. I suggest the following: Frequently use the commands your dogs are familiar with to direct their behavior. Make them sit before you pet or praise them and prior to going outdoors and before eating. Feed them in their crates then remove the bowls. Give them 10 minutes to eat; after that, remove the food. They will soon adjust to this new program.

Be cautious using treats to reward them since attention and food are both triggers for aggression. Teach them to take treats gently and to "leave it" until you give them the okay. When you pet one dog, do not allow the others to push their way in. Calmly and quickly remove any dog that displays this behavior from the room for a brief period. Increase their exercise routine since this situation is stressful for all concerned. Seek out the help of a hands-on trainer or behaviorist. Your situation is more than one person can handle, and it would be a wise investment to ensure the fights stop and your group is happily organized.