

Learn How to Break Up a Dogfight and Come Out Unscathed

Your first response as a dog lover will usually be wrong, and can escalate into a harrowing, dangerous situation resulting in serious injury to you! Instead, try these 9 options for breaking up the fray. Plus, you'll want to recognize and discourage these 4 telltale signaling behaviors.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The natural response of dog guardians is to try to break up a dogfight before one or both dogs are injured, however, it can be a dangerous proposition to attempt to stop dogs from fighting
- There is no cookie cutter approach to breaking up a dogfight that works in every situation or with every dog. It's up to each individual to decide if the risk of intervening outweighs the potential for injury
- There are many methods people employ to try to separate two fighting dogs, many of which involve distracting one or both animals
- The best way to prevent aggressive behavior in your own dog is to identify and address it while he's still a puppy

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If you're a dog lover and see two dogs fighting, your natural response is to want to physically separate them before someone gets hurt. And this is especially true when one or both dogs belong to you.

However, as many, many people who have come before you will attest, it can be very risky business to try to break up a serious dogfight.

Even though they evolved as pack animals and are genetically programmed to get along in social groups, unfortunately, dogs do occasionally fight. When it happens, it can be a harrowing, dangerous situation for both the dueling dogs and their humans.

The first response of many people who encounter a dogfight is to scream at the top of their lungs to try to put a halt to the action. If this doesn't work - and it usually doesn't, and can even cause an escalation in the fighting - the next reflexive move is to try to reach between the dogs to rescue the one who's getting the worst of it.

Attempts to physically separate fighting dogs very often results in serious injury to the human, sometimes inflicted by his or her own dog - which only makes a bad situation worse.

However, it's not realistic to expect a dog lover to simply stand back and watch a vicious dogfight play out. So what's a person to do if and when a fight breaks out?

The Spit-and-Drool Match vs. the Serious Dogfight

According to acclaimed dog behaviorist, the late Dr. Sophia Yin, most fights between unfamiliar dogs or first fights between dogs who are housemates are simply “spit and drool matches” even if there’s a lot of noise and fur flying. If either dog goes further, it’s typically a quick bite-and-release.¹

The major concern in these situations is to get the dogs separated without being bitten, when means you must avoid grabbing the head or neck area of either animal. According to Dr. Yin, the safest method is to grab the dogs by the rear end and quickly pull them away from each other.

Alternatively, and depending on where you’re standing or how fast the dogs are changing position, you can place your foot on the rib cage of one of the dogs and push him away. This is NOT a kick to the dog - it’s simply using your foot against his side as leverage to push him away.

This approach is much safer than bending over either dog while trying to push them apart with your hands. It also leaves your hands free to get control of the other dog if possible.

If you have dog leashes close by, looping the leash under the back two legs of both dogs and pulling them apart from their back ends can also work.

Other Methods of Breaking Up a Dogfight

Other methods of separating fighting dogs involve distractions, including:

- Placing a board or other object between them
- Spraying the dogs with water
- Banging a noisy object near them; blowing an air horn
- Using an aversive spray like citronella (brand name Direct Stop™)
- Tossing a blanket over one or both dogs
- Quickly inviting one of the dogs to go for a walk or a ride in the car
- Lightly popping one or both dogs on the top of the head with a newspaper or magazine
- Ringing the doorbell or opening a door to the outside (if you have a fenced in backyard)

Dr. Yin stresses that in all cases it’s important to avoid taking any action that may cause the dogs to redirect aggression to you.

It’s also important to remember that no technique for breaking up a dogfight is foolproof, and all involve a certain degree of risk to both the dogs and the humans who try to intervene. It’s up to you to understand the risks, weigh the odds, and decide if the risks outweigh the potential for injury.

Once the dogs are separated, it’s important to pay attention to whether one or both dogs want to keep battling, whether they calm down right away, or try to get away. If one dog clearly wants to keep fighting, he’s in need of intensive positive behavior modification training to prevent fights in the future.

Low-level tussles can progress to more dangerous fights in dogs with undiagnosed or unchecked aggression. Also keep in mind that most dogfights can be prevented by attentive guardians who notice when one dog is tense around another, and take immediate action to separate the dogs.

Signs of Interdog Aggression

Interdog aggression becomes a problem when a dog behaves aggressively with dogs in the same household, or more commonly, with unfamiliar dogs.

Some people consider a dog's aggression toward strange dogs to be normal, however, without appropriate intervention and training, some dogs can become disproportionately aggressive due to learning and/or genetic factors.

Interdog aggression is more common in intact male dogs, and dogs of the same gender. The problem typically becomes apparent either when the dog hits puberty (from 6 to 9 months of age), or when he becomes socially mature at 18 to 36 months. Common signs of inter-dog aggression include:

- Growling
- Crouching
- Lip biting
- Tucking the tail
- Snapping
- Licking the lips
- Lunging toward another dog
- Backing away
- Fearful or submissive postures

In the case of interdog aggression between dogs in the same household, there are usually preliminary signs that indicate one dog is attempting to exert social control over another. For example, a dog may stare at and block the other dog's entrance into a room.

The best way to curb a dog's aggressive behavior is to nip it in the bud while he's still a puppy.

Recognizing Aggressive Behavior in Your Puppy

During normal play, a puppy may play bow (lower his head while raising his rear end), present his front end or side to you, hold the front part of his body up, wag his tail, zip back and forth, give high-pitched barks and growls, and spontaneously ambush you or another animal in the house.

These behaviors are fun to watch and participate in with your puppy, unless they become too extreme. Little twists on normal play that can indicate a problem include:

- Prolonged, deep growling
- Fixed gaze
- Stiff posture
- Aggression that is situational or stimulus-dependent rather than spontaneous

These aggressive behaviors may stem from fear, territoriality, conflict, or pain and should be evaluated immediately by you, your veterinarian, and/or a veterinary behaviorist.

How to Discourage Aggressive Puppy Play

In order to prevent a puppy with aggressive tendencies from growing into an aggressive adult dog, your puppy must learn how to play appropriately, and you can help him in the following ways:

- **Sidetrack bad behavior** — Keep a toy on hand that will grab your pup's attention as soon as he engages in inappropriate behavior. Offer him appropriate toys to mouth and chew on before he has a chance to make bad choices.
- **Give verbal cues followed by an action** — If your puppy is biting too hard during play, loudly say "Ouch," and stop playing immediately.
- **Give a time-out** — If your pup isn't responding to your attempts to stop a behavior, put him and a few toys in a separate room or his crate until he settles down.
- **Don't engage in aggressive roughhousing or play** — Some puppies have a low arousal threshold and can become very assertive, quickly. Avoid rigorous or intense play with these puppies, which can escalate into more mouthy play on their part, or nipping behaviors that are difficult to shut down.
- **Use leashes and head halters** — You can use a leash indoors as well as outside to quickly stop a behavior. Don't yank or jerk the leash – simply use it when necessary to gain control over the situation.

Head halters sometimes provide a more natural sense of control than collars do, but it's important to match the collar, harness, or halter to the personality and training needs of each puppy.

Sources and References

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¹ [DrSophiaYin.com](https://www.dr.sophia.yin.com)
