

How to Break Up a Dog Fight

Dr. Brenda Griffin

Dog fights represent an extremely dangerous situation for humans. Dogs in 'fight mode' may bite humans regardless of their relationship. To protect humane safety as well as the welfare of the dogs, every effort must be made to prevent fighting from occurring in animal shelters. Furthermore, if individual animals have fought with one another, they should be permanently separated from one another.

Staff must be prepared to break up fights should they occur. Proper staff training and equipment are required. In particular, staff must become keenly aware of canine body language. Protocols should be in place for proper behavioral healthcare including behavioral history taking, formal evaluation, incident reporting and proper notification and signage.

For breaking up dog fights, standard recommendations include the following:

Establish written protocols and purchase dedicated equipment for breaking up dog fights should they occur in your facility. Establish locations in various wards of the shelter so that equipment is readily available and train staff on its proper use. Hold staff accountable for making sure that equipment is always available in designated locations (both inside and outside) and that protocols are followed.

- Prevention of fights is the best practice: this requires selection of safe pets in the shelter and proper management of those dogs that are known to pose a safety risk.
 - No technique is fool proof for breaking up a dog fight and human injury is always a risk, including severe and even fatal injury.
 - Staff should not try to break up a dog fight alone, but should call for help.
 - All personnel working with aggressive dogs should carry a rape whistle and Spray Shield™ as described below at all times.
- Staff should become familiar with tools and techniques including those that should and those that should not be attempted to break up a fight.
- Staff should utilize the tool that is deemed most likely to quell the fight while keeping themselves and others safe.
- Methods will vary GREATLY depending on the circumstances.

- Once the fight is stopped, the dogs must be physically separated into areas away from each other (preferably where they cannot see each other) as soon as possible.
- The following should NOT be done to try to break up a fight:
 - Do NOT try to get between the dogs involved.
 - Do NOT scream—this often adds fuel to the stress and arousal that triggered the fight to begin with, is generally ineffective at stopping the action, and may actually intensify the aggression.
 - Do NOT hit or kick the dogs—likewise, this will add fuel to the stress and arousal and will very likely intensify the aggression.
- The following tools and techniques may be helpful.
 - The following may be used to try to stop/interrupt a fight—these are all things that dogs typically find offensive to their senses including sounds, smells, and other stimuli that may be strong enough to interrupt fighting. These work best if utilized very early in the course of the conflict prior to full arousal and combat *especially in cases where the aggression is mild to moderate*.
 - Sound a marine air horn or rape whistle.
 - This will also serve to alert staff of a dog fight and that assistance may be needed: for this reason, all personnel should be required to wear or carry a rape whistle at all times.
 - Use Spray Shield™ (Premier Pet Products, formally called Direct Stop).
 - Spray Shield™ is a citronella spray that can be used to interrupt attacks by surprising/distracting animals with a powerful, unpleasant scent, and has been found to be as effective as pepper spray without the harmful effects on animals and people.
 - All personnel working with aggressive dogs should be required to carry Spray Shield™ at all times.
 - Toss a large thick blanket over the dogs.
 - This may interrupt fighting by blunting the dogs' vision, muffling outside stimuli and reducing arousal.
 - It may also protect the handlers who are trying to separate the dogs.

- This technique works best and is safest for use when separating small dogs.

The following will likely be required for severe attacks:

- Blast dogs with water if available. Use powerful spray. Direct the spray in the faces of the dogs if necessary so that they release their bite hold to come up for air.
- Use a CO2 fire extinguisher to emit a high-pressure cloud of gas on the dogs to try to quell the fight.
 - The pressure is so great that it is not uncommon for bits of dry ice to shoot out the nozzle.
 - These units do not leave harmful residue, however physical damage is possible and contact with the eyes should be avoided whenever possible.
- Physical intervention using risk-reducing fight-interrupting tools may be necessary if the above do not work.
 - Use a purpose-made sheet of plywood as a parting board. Attaching handles to the ends of the board may make it easier to maneuver so that you can wedge it between the fighting dogs.
 - Wrap a slip lead around the aggressor's neck and twist and pull it to essentially make it difficult for him to breathe just long enough to interrupt the fight. Or, if the dog is wearing a collar, twist the collar to tighten it around the neck.
 - For Pit Bulls, use a break stick (a specially designed whittled piece of wood tapered to a rounded point at one end) that can be inserted between a dog's teeth to part the jaws so the dog releases his bite hold.
 - Break sticks must be used with extreme caution and only in dire emergencies. The dog whose jaws are parted may redirect his aggression and attack the person with the stick.
 - Break sticks can be purchased on line at <http://www.pbrc.net/shop/bsticks.html>.
- Chemical intervention
 - As a last resort, the use of anesthetic agents may be necessary to heavily sedate dogs so that they can be safely separated.
 - If available, anesthetic agents can be injected into the dogs using a syringe pole.

- Ketamine-xylazine combinations may be particularly useful.
- Caution should be taken since these agents can disinhibit dogs as they take effect, making them potentially more dangerous to people prior to the onset of their full effects, which should cause immobilization.