

The subject for today's article is brought to us by Sarah from Santa Barbara. Sarah is the proud caretaker of a two-year-old female beagle that has had a litter of puppies, one female of which Sarah decided to keep. The puppy is now about eight months old and lately it appears as if the two dogs do not enjoy each others company. In fact, the mother dog will quite viciously attack the eight-month-old and sometimes inflict physical harm. Sarah is naturally quite upset about this problem as anyone might expect and would like some help.

For the sake of our discussion and since Sarah neglected to provide names for her companions, I will refer to the mother dog as beagle #1 and the youngster as beagle # 2.

In veterinary school at the University of California at Davis, we took a very fascinating course titled "Animal Behavior". One of the most interesting parts of this class dealt with the problems associated with the introduction of a new companion into a household with another companion who has already established residency. This situation and the potential problems with it are fairly common and living through this can be tough. I will share with you what I was taught in school concerning the handling of these types of situations as well as the experiences I have had with the use of these techniques in practice.

First of all it is important to recognize the motivation for these actions taken by the elder member of the canine group. This behavior stems from the instinctive behavior found in all dogs likely due to their development from wolves. I realize it may be hard to imagine a Yorkie terrier being a step away from a wolf, but it is true! It is natural for dogs being a pack animal, just like wolves, to try to move up the ladder of dominance within the pack. In a household, the members of the pack include the two legged and four legged members. The dog learns its place on the ladder from the other members in the household just like the wolves learn their respective places within the pack. Problems arise when there are challenges to these established positions.

In Sarah's case, the puppy is trying to move up the ladder and is challenging the older beagle's established position. This challenge is often very subtle and most commonly not perceived by the caretakers. This is why caretakers will almost always report that the newer dog will be doing nothing and will suddenly be attacked by the established canine resident. This is not the case. What is happening between the two is simply not observed by the caretakers.

Beagle # 1 knows that # 2 is trying to supersede her position as the alpha dog and is demonstrating to # 2 as well as other members of the pack (the caretakers), that she (# 1) is the dominant dog. She does this instinctively by aggression toward # 2. The solution I am about to suggest might seem a bit strange to say the least, but after years of experience I can tell you it can work very well. The one qualifier I must add is that I am only interpreting a letter and I may not be correct in my diagnosis of the problem. However, if I am, there is a good chance for success.

The key issue here is beagle #1's perceived need to demonstrate her position over beagle #2 to her caretakers. In order to eliminate this perceived need, the caretakers must at all times, reinforce beagle #1's position. This means that when they come home they should always greet beagle #1 first and lavish attention on her always before beagle #2.

Incidentally, I should note that beagle #2 already knows its position when the two dogs are alone. There is likely no fighting when the caretakers are not around.

If a fight does break out, discipline must be carried out on beagle #2. And praise dished out to beagle #1. I know this sounds strange especially since #1 is the apparent aggressor, but it makes sense when you understand the motivation. By reinforcing beagle #1's position in the household to beagle #2, the problem will likely cease.