

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

Gender Choices

One piece of advice you're likely to hear when choosing a dog to enter your family is "If you've already got a boy, get a girl. If you've got a girl, get a boy." Why do people always say that you should choose the opposite gender when bringing a dog into a home that already has dogs? The most common belief is that having two male or two female dogs will result in tension, and possibly fighting, between them. However, many people have dogs of the same gender living harmoniously together and some have dogs of opposing genders living in chaos and conflict. So how true are the rumours and how do you make an informed choice?

It is believed that dogs of the same gender will be more competitive with each other, leading to aggressive struggles. The problem with a broad statement such as this is that, firstly, aggression is a complex behaviour that usually results from various motivations, and secondly, each dog is so unique that predicting behaviour based solely on one aspect, such as gender, is not reliable. However, simply looking at numbers, it does seem that households with same gender dogs do experience more tension and aggression. So, it is both true and false.

In my own experience, I have had two male dogs in the past and now have two females. My two males did have the odd scuffle and on a couple of occasions drew blood. I have never experienced any problems between my two females. Why the difference? With my two males, the elder was unneutered and the younger neutered. This is supposed to prevent tension as the unneutered dog is clearly the more dominant thus making hierarchy struggles less likely. The elder male was a very dominant dog and never missed an opportunity to put his subordinate in his place. His subordinate though, was not always keen to be dominated and often fought back. Hence, tension. With my current two females, they are both spayed, which technically should make them more aggressive and dominant than if they weren't spayed as spaying decreases the feminine hormones. The more dominant female is quietly so, and only asserts her position when absolutely necessary and usually in the least aggressive way possible. The subordinate female happily accepts her position as follower and does not attempt to up her status. So the question is, has gender played any significant role in the relationships between my same-gender dogs? Yes and no! The mistake I made with my

two male dogs was not neutering them both. This would have decreased the excessive dominance in my elder boy and probably resulted in less tension between them. In my girls, I don't believe gender is much of an issue because I specifically chose a meeker dog as my second so that my first girl's position would be secure. If I had chosen a more dominant female, there might have been trouble. Another interesting thing is that my newest addition is male, so you'd think there wouldn't be any problem with the relationships right? Well, the little boy often tries to dominate the two females, with no success and no aggression, but he does try nonetheless. So, no problem with the two girls, but some struggle between them and the boy.

In my experience as a behaviourist I have seen aggression between same-gender dogs and opposite-gender dogs. The worst cases of aggression have usually been between dogs of the same gender. What I have noticed is that the main problem is one of hierarchy, when the two dogs vie for the more dominant position. One of the problems is that people are attracted to confident and outgoing puppies. Those puppies often grow up into very confident adult dogs that naturally want to be in charge.

When choosing a new dog or puppy for your household, take gender into consideration, but don't make it your only criteria. In general, a male and female will get along better, but more important is the temperament of the dog. If you have a strong, confident and dominant dog, do not get another dog that is the same. Rather obtain a dog that is naturally submissive and will be happy to follow the lead of the other dog.

Ultimately there is no right or wrong decision when it comes to gender. The more crucial decision is based on the individual temperament and personality of each dog. Match your dogs wisely and don't make an emotional decision – getting a dog is a huge responsibility and should not be done lightly. Also, ensure that you are at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, which will make it less likely for your dogs to try and gain that position.

If you have any concerns about what type of dog to obtain with regards to gender or temperament, speak to your vet, breeder or a behaviourist about matching your existing dog to a new dog. It's never just a 'dog'; it is a being with emotions, needs and a unique personality that is going to affect it's relationship with other dogs. Matchmaking dogs is just as difficult and complicated as matchmaking people! Make the right choice at the beginning and you will save a lot of stress and heartache later on.

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