



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Living with Littermates

So, you have taken the plunge and got two puppies the same age. It is important to know that there are significant challenges associated with this!

A big challenge of adopting puppy pairs is their tendency to bond very closely with each other, often to the exclusion of a meaningful relationship with their humans (Miller 2010).

Another challenge is that research has shown that the contributing factors to aggression in dogs in the same household are: same age, size and sex (Stabler 2003).



Dogs MUST be allowed to develop as individuals

Even though they may be siblings, they will be two totally different dogs! Just like most human siblings are different in what they like, who they hang out with and in their personalities. So it is important to allow each pup to develop separately. Just because one pup likes playing with other dogs, it doesn't mean the other one will. Make sure each pup gets what they need.

The following information will help give them a chance to mature into two unique dogs, not one co-dependent pair.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

Remember that your two puppies will be living together for life, so they will need:

- Separate sleeping areas - crates are ideal for this. Refer to our crate training info sheet.
- Separate walks
- Separate training classes
- Separate play time (with other dogs)
- Time apart during the day
- Separate feeding areas

But it doesn't mean that they have to spend all their time apart! Start with a few minutes a day and build it up to a couple of hours. Taking them to separate training classes is ideal, as mostly these go for an hour in length, and each puppy gets to interact with other puppies of different sizes and breeds.

They may still go for walks together, but try to include a couple of walks per week where they go at separate times.



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Developing the Relationship

The pups will have a very 'fluid' relationship. It will develop over time and be constantly changing as they mature. For example, one pup may be more confident than the other and one pup may feel they need to 'guard' items from the other.

Just like with humans, sometimes siblings get along great when they are toddlers, then when they become teenagers, they fight all the time!

As the pups develop, this can cause changes in behaviour that can cause conflict where there wasn't any before. All of a sudden the pups hit 8 months of age, and they start fighting over food, or fighting over attention. What one tolerated as a younger pup, he/she doesn't anymore.

This is why having a good set up where you can separate them (and they are used to that) can help. Obviously you want to identify the triggers which cause any fighting and then prevent it.

MYTH: "We'll treat them just the same, they'll be fine!"

Dogs are social creatures - they form complex relationships with humans and other animals. While the "dominance theory" is out dated, dogs do not operate as "equals" in every situation.

One puppy may always eat from the bowl first; the other may push him out of the way to be greeted first. One pup may always be jumping on top of the other in play, while the other may be the puppy who barks when someone knocks on the door. They will have a fluid social structure occurring, which we need to be aware of. If the situation arises where your pups are interacting with you at the same time, be mindful to allow their social hierarchy to exist uninterrupted.

An example of this in action:

You are sitting on the lounge supervising your puppies' play time. One pup comes over to you to say hello, and is then bumped aside by their littermate who also wants to be patted. If you think, "Poor thing, getting bullied!" and ignore the confident pup, and pick up and cuddle the one who got pushed aside, you are undermining the relationship equilibrium the pups are developing. What began as a jovial shoulder bump out of the way may turn into growling or bared teeth to ensure the second pup is not there to be greeted out of turn. While the second pup may once have happily waited his turn, your assurance that he is more important may encourage him to challenge his sibling. Dogs have their own complex social rules. Imposing an "everyone is equal" mindset will simply not work, for them or for you.

References and further reading

Miller, Pat (2010) Problems Associated With Adopting Two Puppies at the Same Time, The Whole Dog Journal, Belvoir Media Group, LLC

Spitzer Leah (2003) Raising Siblings (Littermates) or Raising 2 Puppies at the Same Time Canine Learning Centre Inc <http://www.caninedevelopment.com/Sibling.htm>

Stabler R J (2003) Review of Interdog Aggression Sibling Rivalry 1998-2002 - preliminary results
Stabler Behaviour, IVBM August 2003 Caloundra

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