

# Your place or mine?

When two dog owners get together and decide to set up home, people and pooches will all live happily ever after. Won't they? **Lez Graham** discusses why the dream of 'one big happy family' can sometimes turn into a nightmare.

**M**oving house is always a time of upheaval, but it can be an even greater challenge when it involves bringing two families together as well. Sometimes it's two single dog owners who decide to make a commitment and share their homes with each other; sometimes it's two families, with children and pets in tow, coming together to make one.

In my work as a canine behaviour practitioner I'm often consulted by clients who have moved in together and then found that their dogs are clashing. Other times, though, it's the clients who are clashing with one another by arguing over the dogs!

## "HELP, THEY'RE GOING TO KILL EACH OTHER!"

Quite often, we automatically expect our dog to get along with every other dog he meets, whether that's in the street, the park or at home. However, a lot of the cases of supposed aggression in dogs that I've seen are not to do with the dog being aggressive; they're more to do with the dog trying to communicate to other dogs that they're behaving inappropriately and getting too close. This is a natural behaviour and there's usually nothing wrong with it until a second species, namely a human, gets involved. The first thing we tend to

do in this situation is tell our dogs to 'play nicely' and try to get them to 'talk' to each other – literally pushing their faces towards each other, which is the last thing they need. Or, one dog will start to grumble because the other is boisterously bounding all over him – but it's the dog doing the grumbling that gets told off while the unruly dog gets praised and mollycoddled. Yep, it really does happen like that!

Something similar can happen when two dogs who have been on their own for a long time, and used to being the focus of attention in a household, are forced to live under the same roof.

In their own language, the dogs that are brought together will be communicating to one another about who will be the leader and who will be the follower in certain situations. For example, toys mean a lot to my dog Goldie and food used to mean a lot to my old Labrador. If Goldie had his favourite toy near him he would curl his lip and growl, making it clear that this item was important and he was prepared to die for it.

Goldie would quite happily walk away from a bone though, but the reverse was true for my Labrador who was more into bones than toys. Quite often, if Goldie was getting all my attention, the Labrador would bring over a toy to try to entice him away – once Goldie moved away from my side towards the

toy the Labrador would drop it and come over to me for a cuddle instead.

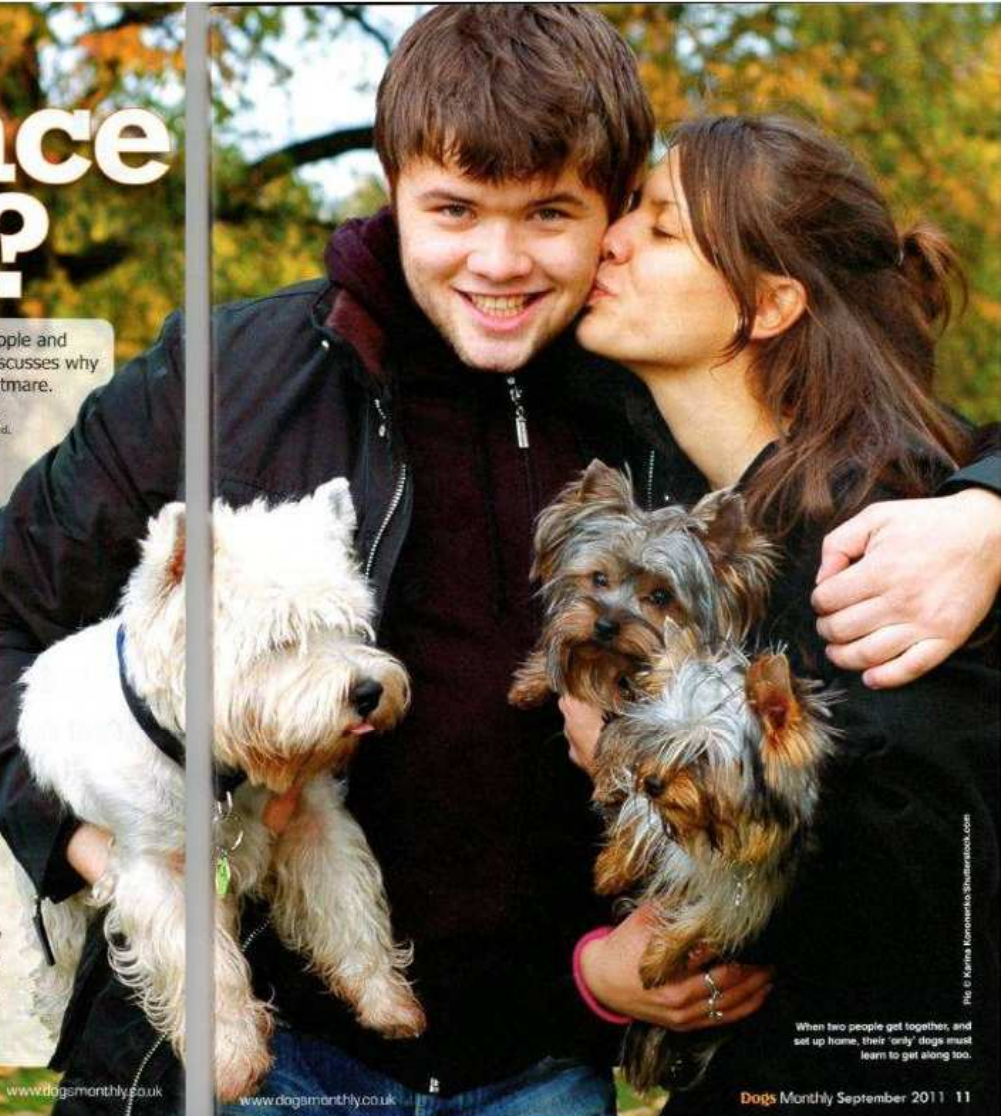
This is a classic example of two dogs communicating quite clearly to one another about how to behave in each other's presence, thereby resolving situations on their own without any interference from the human in the house. I could have got angry with them for being possessive or not 'playing nicely' but they did a much better job of communicating with one another than I ever could.

Having said that, I always draw the line if a dog's behaviour escalates beyond lip curling and growling – aggression is not tolerated in my pack.

When you bring dogs together, start by keeping them on a lead beside you as you walk around the home and then let them drag the leads around. This way you can step in the second interaction escalates beyond 'polite' conversation between the dogs and you can apply some discipline to the situation and enforce your house rules.

That doesn't mean getting all loud and aggressive – just separate the dogs via their leads, with a possible correction (such as a 'No' if deemed necessary) and get them to settle

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When two people get together and set up home, their 'only' dogs must learn to get along too.

Fig. © Marina Kuznetsov/Shutterstock.com

## Training & behaviour

down once again. It can seem like a struggle to start off with but once you get the dogs relaxing in each other's company you're halfway there.

Keep them in separate rooms overnight and restrict the amount of time they have together during the day, so that they don't feel as if they're encroaching on each other's territories and they start to look forward to having the company of the other dog.

## "HELP, I'M GOING TO KILL MY PARTNER!"

You guessed it, the cause of this cry is often caused by one party treating their dog like a baby and spoiling him rotten. Or maybe like a group of nuns comparing their offspring and believing their dog can do no wrong. "My dog's a saint, but yours is always stealing the toys and sleeping in my dog's bed" – you know the kind of thing!

A reality check is needed in this instance and a good canine behaviour practitioner will calmly educate the owners about how the dogs involved view the situation. It really is simply a case of "If I'm on it, I own it" or "If it's in my mouth it's mine until you take it off me", which is how animals think. The reason they sink off the settee when you walk into the room is because they have a negative association with being on there in the past, rather than logically

working out which possessions belong to whom.

Part of the problem in these situations is that the owners are taking personally the way their partner's dog is behaving, and can't see beyond that.

I received an email the other day that said: "I'm looking into getting my partner's dog trained. My own little dog is fine but my partner's is a nightmare." As you might imagine, the email went downhill from there, comparing his dog unfavourably with hers. It ended with "Can you contact my partner on...". Hmm, I thought, I wonder if he even knows you've been in touch with me! A much better approach would have been for the owner to talk to her partner first, explain the problem she was encountering with his dog and ask him to email me.

## HAPPY EVER-AFTERS

In 2008 I was contacted by a lady who, along with her husband, had jointly bought a house with her parents and had all moved in together. Her reason for contacting me was that she owned a grumpy and unsocialised Border Terrier bitch and her parents had an aggressive eight-year-old male Labrador. So far, the dogs were living in the same house but in different areas and had never met; she and her parents needed help bringing the two dogs together so that the household was less fraught and everyone could happily share the same space.

We started off working with the young Border Terrier, Willow,

who was exactly as her owner described her – unsocialised and fairly used to calling the shots. She was a lovely little dog – a real character – and I understood where the self importance had come from.

Once I had a clear picture of Willow it was time to turn our attention to the Labrador, Pebble. He also ruled the roost and wouldn't think twice of telling you off if you disturbed him while he was lying on the sofa. However, his mindset changed rather quickly once we started to work with him.

Understanding and empathy is a must when you work with dogs; not so much for the dog, but for the owners. I understand exactly where it had all gone wrong with Pebble; he was not from the best breeding stock in the world, he'd had numerous operations on his hips as a youngster and had been loved and fussed over by adoring owners.

Unfortunately, like a lot of strong dogs, Pebble had taken advantage of the situation and become demanding – this can be a slippery slope towards aggression and it's something canine behaviourists see a lot of.

Once we had both Willow and Pebble walking nicely individually, it was time to try some parallel walking. At this point, it was over to the owners and, I have to say, I have never worked with more dedicated clients; every night it was a case of walking up and down the street on opposite sides of the road, bringing the dogs together ever so slowly and also doing an awful lot of

standing still doing nothing.

Eventually, one day when the dogs were walking closely and calmly in the street, the owners were to walk straight into the home and into the kitchen. I'd made it clear that they weren't to plan this, but just one day when they thought they'd had a nice walk they were to head straight into the kitchen and talk, with their dogs on lead, and then walk back out again.

This routine was expanded a little every day until the dogs were off lead in the kitchen; then, gradually, other rooms in the house were introduced. I kept in touch with the family for a few months by email until we were happy that all was well and settled in the household. A couple of months ago I received an email to let me know Pebble the Labrador had died of old age; the message said that the last few years he spent with Willow as his companion were most enjoyable for all the family.

## LIVING IN HARMONY

Bringing two doggy households together can sometimes be fraught and stressful, but it can also be wonderfully satisfying and life-enhancing as the important beings in your life – human and canine – learn not only to live in harmony but also to enjoy one another's company.

If you're struggling bringing two family dogs together, don't give up on them, contact a good canine behaviour practitioner and embark on a programme to bring balance into all your lives. ●

With patience and training, any initial bad behaviour by one or more dogs can usually be overcome.

## About the author

Lez Graham works full-time as a canine behaviour practitioner and Gundog trainer; she is also education and development officer with the Guild of Dog Trainers and is a tutor with the Cambridge Institute of Dog Behaviour & Training. Lez has recently published her first book, *The Pet Gundog*.

