

**My Pet Has Issues!**  
**by Amy B. Wallis, Ph.D.**

**Recently, I offered to take care of a friend's dog while my friend was away for a weekend. While my own dog plays regularly with the other dog at the park and on walks, I found that he was very bossy with my friend's dog at home, stopping her from coming near me, pushing her away from her food, and even growling and nipping at her when she tried to enter the house. What happened?**

What you're experiencing is territoriality, and it's a very natural behavior for dogs. Dogs have a very clear sense of what is theirs, and they are naturally inclined to protect it, even when that requires aggression. Dogs are pack animals, and like most animals that spend their lives in groups, they have a social structure. When you bring a new dog into your home, you essentially require the dogs to establish "rules" of behavior with one another. This rule-setting process can take anywhere from seconds to days, but needs to happen in order for the dogs to live together peacefully.

In the case you describe, your dog was creating rules like "don't come in unless I say you can", and "since you're just a guest, I can eat your food if I want to". While it doesn't sound very polite, these rules work in the dog world! In most cases, the new dog learns quickly and follows the rules, and the structure is maintained. It's important to note that humans can create problems by deciding that their dog is being rude and correcting or disciplining him for setting rules. This is an example of the mismatch between human etiquette and dog etiquette, and the dogs will find it more confusing than helpful. In general, as long as the dogs are negotiating their rules successfully, your best bet is to stay out of the way and allow them to figure it out.

Occasionally during the rule-setting process, the new dog reacts poorly or refuses to comply, in which case the behavior can escalate into fighting. This behavior is never appropriate, as both dogs are at great risk of being injured. You can minimize the likelihood of this happening by having the dogs meet first on neutral ground, such as in the park, then bringing them into the home together. Watch the body language the dogs exhibit; if you see the hair on either dog's back stand up, hear deep growls, or notice the dogs showing their teeth, calmly distract them by calling them to you and offering soft words and petting. You can even ask them each to sit and give them a treat for doing so. Overall, the goal is to create a positive, calm environment for the dogs to engage in their own rule-setting, and to refrain from punishing or discouraging these normal dog behaviors.