

## Adopting and Raising Littermates – Not a Good Idea!

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Two sibling puppies are up for adoption and they are pretty darn cute together. You hate to tear them away from each other so you think “Why not adopt both puppies? They can keep each other company!” “One puppy for each child in the family.” The shelter, breeder or rescue group

adoption coordinator says it is a great idea! STOP and listen. A dog trainer, behaviorist or veterinarian who is knowledgeable about puppy development and dog behavior will tell you NOT to do it. Shelters and rescue groups are well intentioned. However, staff and volunteers may not have a background in dog psychology, behavior and development. They may not know that adopting littermates to the same family is a bad idea. Experts will tell you it is NEVER in the best interests of the puppies to be adopted together. Listen to the experts. I often see Petfinder ads for littermates saying that the puppies don’t need to be separated. The puppies do need to be separated.

Your desire to adopt two siblings is understandable – they get along, they play, sleep and eat together, and it seems so sad to separate them. They can keep each other company. From a dog behavior perspective, adopting them both can be harmful to both pups and not end well in the future.

The Littermate Syndrome” is a real problem that can be mild or severe. Mild cases are barely noticeable. You might see some mild squabbling or minor anxiety when one dog is removed from the other. Severe cases can lead to constant fighting between them to the extent that they are causing physical damage to each other. I’m talking about bite wounds that require veterinary attention. In the middle of trying to separate them, owners are often badly bitten. The fights

can seem to come out of nowhere. The fights are actually the result of two pups who need to be living separate lives who are being forced to share the same home.

Littermates can suffer severe separation anxiety from each other. Severe separation anxiety is more than some whining, fussing, house soiling and sad faces. Severe separation anxiety in littermates can manifest in a dog injuring itself and damaging property in an attempt to get to his/her littermate. Dogs will jump through windows, break teeth on crates, destroy doors and walls, and injure themselves trying to find their littermate. Dogs suffering from severe separation anxiety live in horrible state of sheer panic when they are not with their littermate.

Some of the cases I have seen involve dogs that cannot be separated for the time it takes to take one for a walk. Often one dog is sick and must stay over at the veterinarian clinic. Alone at home the sibling will become destructive and vocal and unable to be calmed.

I have seen sisters that fought so badly that one was hospitalized several times for deep puncture wounds. Family members were badly bitten trying to break up the fights. They were not open to the idea of rehoming one of the sisters until a particularly savage fight occurred.

I watched a CT shelter allow five littermates to share a kennel and never be separated. They developed into what we called the "Feral Girls". By six months they could not be touched by a person, they moved in a fearful pack when let out alone in the field to play. A couple became bolder in their protection of the pack and no one would turn their back on them. They moved as one unit all the time. When a knowledgeable worker tried to separate them, the manager reprimanded her and put them back in one kennel. One dog was adopted out – she bolted from her new home and it took months to trap her. The remaining Feral Girls are still there living as a pack and listed as adoptable – five years later. Keeping those pups together resulted in lasting developmental damage that cannot be undone. They have lived their whole lives in a windowless warehouse for dogs – a prison.

One pair I worked with developed into two bonded dogs who were fearful and aggressive towards other dogs and new people. After multiple bites to people, they were euthanized before they reached the age of 2 years. Rescue groups who evaluated them deemed them unsafe to place in new homes. Sadly it was a rescue group who adopted the two puppies to the family. The family did not know the dangers of adopting littermates. The shelter/rescue should have known.

Dogs **MUST** be allowed to develop as individuals. At seven weeks of age, they are ready to look to the outside world for bonding and individuality. Pups at eight weeks old will bond easily to humans **UNLESS** they do not leave their litter. Leaving the litter means living the littermates **AND** the parents. Keeping siblings from the same litter together interferes with this ability to bond with humans and develop as individuals.

Often one pup appears bold and confident, while the other appears withdrawn and shy. The pups are quickly labeled in the home “He’s afraid of everything. He won’t do that - he’s too scared” “She is so brave. She will try anything. She takes all his toys away” and so forth.” Labeling them and treating them as if their personalities are set in stone does a great disservice to both puppies. If you never expect him to be brave and never help him to develop confidence, he will grow up to be an anxious unhappy dog who is terrified by the world and by separation from his littermate. The confident bold puppy may very well be a bully which is not a desirable trait to encourage.

So what do you do if you have already gotten littermates? This is **ALWAYS** a hard phone call for me to take. I am torn between my duty as a trainer and my desire not to upset my clients. In the end, I have to first consider what is best for the dogs. It is also what is best for the owners who may not realize the trouble and heartbreak they may be in for.

Two solutions exist. While the first solution is the best one for the dogs, it is almost always unthinkable for the owners. Once they become attached to the pups (the minute they see those cute faces), the first solution is a hard one to face. The **BEST** solution is to rehome one puppy. Place one pup in a good home – maybe with a friend or family member. Remarkable improvements can occur quite quickly in the personalities of both pups when the owners re-home one. The sooner you make the decision and rehome one pup, the better for the puppies and for you. The longer you wait, the harder it will be for everyone.

The second solution is to do everything in your power to create two individual dogs. You must give them their own space to develop their own personalities, and to look to you for bonding, guidance, and love. Each puppy must have a tremendous amount of “only dog” time. You must:

1. Crate them separately (preferably in separate rooms or at opposite ends of a room.)
2. Feed them separately.
3. Walk them separately.
4. Play with them separately.
5. Take them to the vets separately.
6. Train them separately.
7. TRAIN them! Take them to a good obedience class where the instructor knows how to work with littermates. Take them on separate nights. Do NOT take them to the same class. If you must take them to the same class, they should be on opposite ends of the room during class.

The puppies can play together, but you must institute these separation procedures and stick to them. Keeping the siblings together at all times will create two parts of a whole, not two individuals. Most of the cases that I see show some signs of littermate syndrome – some quite severe. The more severe cases are heartbreaking.

If you decide to keep both pups, please make the commitment to do the double duty. Yes, it will take twice the amount of time. Yes, it will be twice the work. But to not do this will create problems that are beyond the pet owner’s ability to repair. You will not need to keep them apart forever. It is recommended that you follow the above program for the first year of their lives at a minimum!

Do not take the advice of well-meaning people who tell you it would be ok to adopt littermates. The people advising you are well meaning and love dogs, but are misinformed. Adopt one shelter puppy or dog or buy one puppy from a reputable breeder and enjoy the one-on-one time with your new companion!