

Big Red - Undisputed Queen of the household

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I first met Rory O'Neill in 2007 when she worked with me to help introduce a new dog to an old one who had dog-aggression issues. I can confidently state that without her calm expertise I would not have been able to safely add a second dog to my household.

The problem was that Big Red, my Chow-cross dog, considered herself the undisputed Queen of the household and she did not like other dogs at all! Meanwhile I had fallen in love with Little Boy, a sweet-natured, little terrier-mix who was living at our local SPCA.

Big Red, a strong-willed refugee saved from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, was my first dog, so for the most part I was an inexperienced dog person. However, I knew enough to realize that if I were going to successfully integrate Little Boy into our home, I needed expert help.

Our vet recommended Rory and I called her immediately to see if she could advise us. She agreed to see the two dogs together with me to make an assessment. I was on pins and needles to hear what she thought the chances were of being able to modify Big Red's aggression so that Little Boy could live happily and safely in our home. If she couldn't help us, I knew I would have had to return Little Boy to the SPCA and not go forward with the adoption.

Rory came to the house and watched me and studied the dogs. At the time, I thought she was assessing just the dogs but I now know that a huge part of what she was doing was figuring me out and measuring how I interacted with the dogs. From that very first session, Rory instilled me with confidence that made me believe that with her guidance I could learn to manage the dogs and could work successfully with Big Red to modify her aggressive attitude towards Little Boy. It was very important to me that the needs of both dogs were honoured and that they were kept in a safe environment at all times. I was not interested in behaviour modification that involved punishment or pain and I was happy to learn that Rory felt the same way.

We worked together over a period of about 6 weeks for a total of 6 sessions. Using lots of positive reinforcement, with treats when appropriate, we began to accustom the dogs to each other and to reward their good behaviour. It is hard to say who learned more – the dogs or me! In any case, well, before the end of six weeks, Big Red and Little Boy were happily walking side by side and living peacefully together in the house. Proud of our success, we became more

ambitious and started to concentrate on getting Big Red comfortable with other dogs so she could go to the dog park. Of course, we continued reinforcing her good behaviour with Little Boy.

Now, nearly two years on, my two-dog household is a happy one. Thanks to Rory O'Neill, I am a much better, more informed owner and my dogs live contently together.