Neutron and Lucky

Neutron is a very timid -+2 year old neutered large crossbreed who is a rescue dog. Lucky is a 1 ½ year old neutered Bull Terrier. The two dogs seem to get on fine most of the time, Lucky will occasionally growl at Neutron but there had been no fights. Neutron behaves very submissively and timidly towards everyone. Both dogs had been to training when they were younger and still go for classes infrequently (more as a social event then to train). 1 month ago while the owners and a friend were relaxing in front of the TV, the dogs walked in and, all of a sudden, Lucky just attacked Neutron and fought with him, when the dogs were broken apart, they both had to go to the vet for stitches. About a week ago the same thing happened, a relaxing quiet evening at home was disturbed by the dogs fighting. The difference was this time the fight occurred outside and both dogs seemed to start it at the same time. This fight also resulted in stitches for both dogs. After much questioning and probing into both incidents, the time preceding the incidents and the repercussions of the fights, I discovered that the same friend, Nicky, was present on both occasions. Nicky is the person that holds the training sessions that the dogs go to, and she has trained both dogs. She has been at the house on many other occasions but these two times were the only times it has just been her and the owners, with no-one else present. These have been the only serious fights between the dogs, the worst it has gotten before is Lucky snapping at Neutron.

E - Mail:

Nicky's presence seems to be the trigger for these fights, it seems when she is there, your dogs begin to compete for her attention. They are not making it obvious to you but they both want Nicky's attention. I also feel that when Nicky and other people are there, they are generally getting attention from someone but when it's just Nicky, she is the novel presence in the house. They still love you and do want your attention but when Nicky is there, she is the most interesting, and they can get attention from you at any time. As both dogs know her and have previously been trained by her, they seem to see her as a valuable resource who often gives treats out. For dogs to fight over something they need to view it as something very important, as they must weigh up the risks involved (getting injured) against how much they want the resource. In this case the resource is Nicky's attention.

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What I would suggest is that when Nicky comes to the house alone, ignore the dogs and then as soon as they have gotten over their initial excitement, do a short training session with them. In this way they will be getting attention from Nicky and they will be getting the sort of attention they are used to her giving them. This session doesn't have to be long, a few minutes and can be very basic. It is just to allow the dogs to be acknowledged and to settle them down.

Follow up:

I sent an email summarizing the consultation to the owners the day after the consultation. I then phoned after 1 week, the owners said that Nicky had not been to the house but they would take my advice and let me know as soon as she does come alone to the house. A week later they called me and were very happy as Nicky had been at the house the previous night and she did a short training session when arriving. The dogs seemed to enjoy it and there was no fight, they even lay down together that night while Nicky was there. The owners and Nicky have promised to continue to handle the situation this way and then slowly begin to skip out the training sessions, only doing one every second visit, and then slowly phasing them out altogether.

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