

Detective's Toolkit:

Map Your Dog Family's Dynamics

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Multi-Dog Families - Understanding Patterns: Illustration 1

For Episode 7, here is the diagram created to answer the question: “Why do my dogs fight, and how worried should I be?”

To provide answers, we begin by illustrating the key players: Barnie, Pop, Monica, Tom, and even young Carrie. As the story unfolds, additional players and their roles in the system are incorporated into the map, highlighting the broader dynamics of the household.

As noted in the episode, the incidents that brought Monica and Tom to me stemmed from concerns that Barnie was attacking and biting Pop.

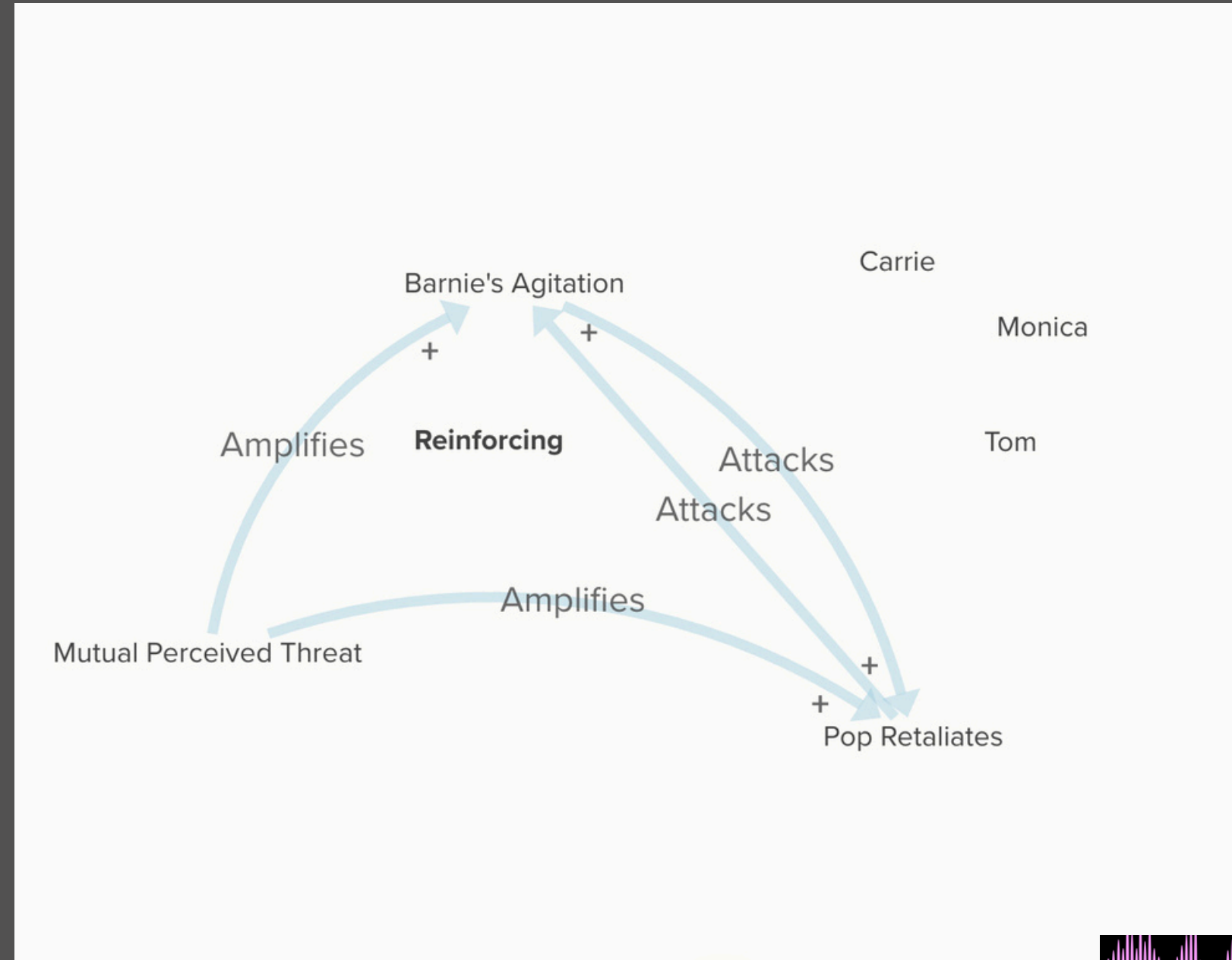
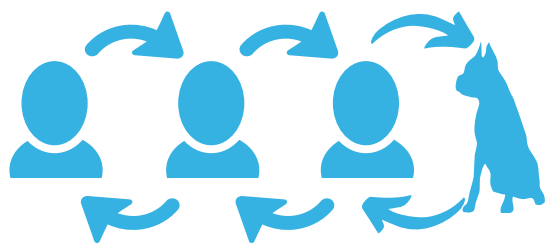
The arrows between Barnie and Pop are called “Connections.” These represent relationships and can be named based on the behaviour observed—in this case, ‘attack.’ Connections can increase or decrease behaviour in the other. The ‘+’ symbol shows that Barnie attacking Pop creates a strong reaction, amplifying Pop’s behaviour.

Next, we renamed ‘Barnie’ on this map to Barnie’s “agitation” and updated Pop’s label to Pop’s “retaliation,” an instinctual reaction to defend himself, perhaps.

We then added the concept of Mutual Perception of Threat, illustrating that both Barnie and Pop now see each other as sources of danger, which amplifies their respective emotional states.

This reveals the tension in the system, which continues to escalate.

When learning about feedback loops—Reinforcing and Balanced—it becomes clear that the mutual perceived threat loops back into Barnie’s agitation, increasing his likelihood of attacking again. As such, we label the loop Reinforcing. Similarly, Pop’s retaliatory behaviour reinforces his perception of Barnie as a threat, completing the cycle.



Multi-Dog Families - Understanding Patterns: Illustration 2

Expanding to a fuller picture — we can see the systems dynamic, and multiple factors contribute to the behaviours we're seeing.

Monica's Calm Responses - When Monica remains calm, it sends a signal of safety to the system, which can help reduce Pop's perception of Barnie as a threat. The negative (-) signs shows she decreases the perception. This means that the calmer Monica is, the less likely Pop and Barnie are to perceive each other as threats.

Tom's Stress - If Tom becomes stressed like raising his voice or intervening in a tense moment without clear direction—it can heighten the system's tension. We connect Tom's Stress to Barnie's Agitation with a positive (+) because he amplifies Barnie's agitation, feeding the reinforcing loop we've already identified."

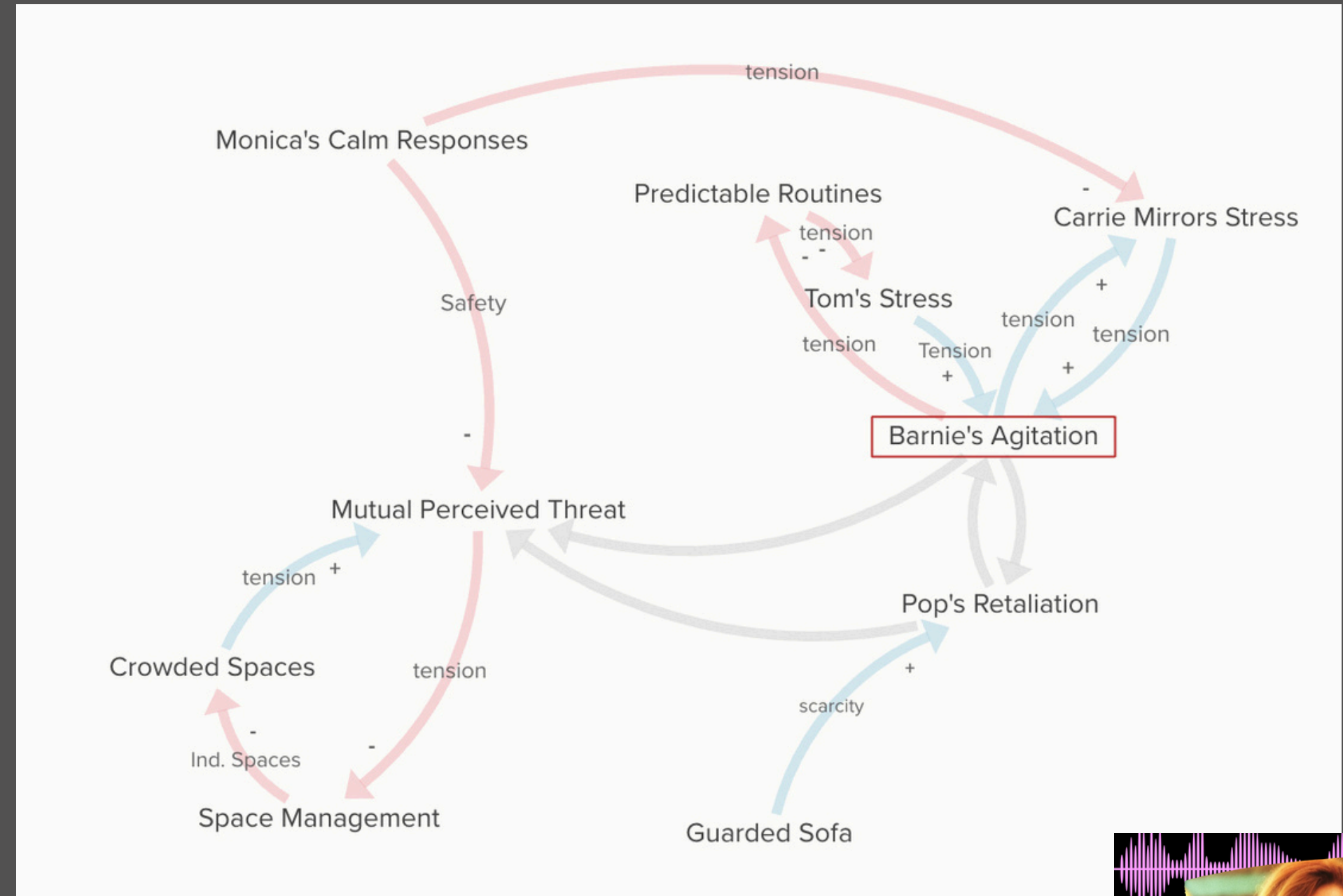
Guarded Sofa - Pop guards the sofa as a high-value resource. This creates a direct connection to Pop Retaliation - and, the more Pop values the sofa, the more likely he is to retaliate when Barnie approaches.

Crowded Spaces - If the space is too small or cluttered, it amplifies the mutual perceived threat that Pop and Barnie have in common. A tighter space increases the chances of both dogs seeing each other as threats.

Carrie Mirrors Stress - When Pop and Barnie are tense, Carrie often mirrors their stress, which can further amplify the overall system tension. Let's connect Carrie Mirrors Stress to Barnie's Agitation showing the that it increases the tension (+).

Space Management - Barriers or designated zones to give each dog their own space. This intervention directly reduces competition and tension. This shows that better space management reduces the occurrence of crowded spaces. Finally, we connect Mutual Perceived Threat back to Space Management with a negative polarity (-) This indicates that by addressing mutual perceived threat through better space management, disrupts the reinforcing loop creating a balancing loop that reduces tension over time."

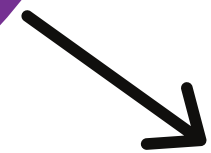
Predictable Routines - We show that establishing consistent times for feeding, play, and rest, Monica and Tom create a sense of security for their dogs. Predictable routines provide stability in the household, helping the dogs anticipate what comes next, which reduces their overall tension and reduces Tom's stress.





*It is not about the sofa. It is not about the food.
It is not about the toy.*

*It is **Scarcity Fear***



A Scarcity Threat is when a dog anticipates that something valuable—like space, attention, or an opportunity—might be restricted. It's not about what is happening, but what the dog thinks might happen, and that triggers their brain to act.

In a multi-dog family, if one dog—say, Pop—starts guarding, that tension spreads. Other dogs, like Carrie, pick up on it, and their brains trigger the same emotional and nervous system response. It becomes a shared reaction to a perceived threat.

That's scarcity threat.

Detective's Toolkit:

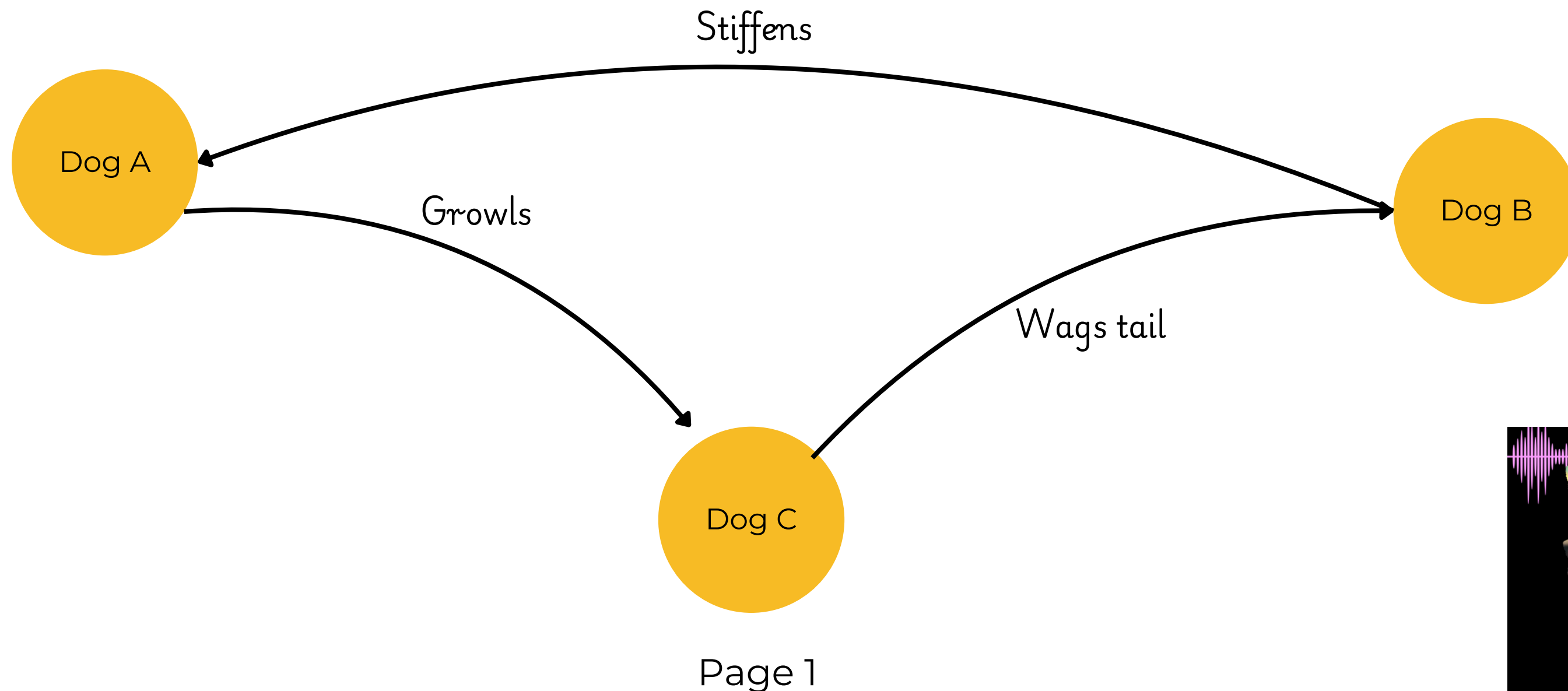
Map Your Dog Family's Dynamics

Every behaviour is a signal, a piece of the puzzle. Think of this guide as your detective's toolkit—helping you carefully observe, listen, and uncover the subtle signals that shape your dog family's dynamics.

Remember, it's not about individual moments but the rhythms, cycles, and patterns that connect your dogs' behaviours. These signals are threads in your family's system fabric, guiding you to the changes that bring balance."

Instructions:

1. On the next page, in the square on the left, enter in your dogs names and draw a circle around each.
2. Draw lines to show how your dogs interact
2. Label the lines with the signals observed (e.g., Growl, Freeze, Wag Tail).
3. Observe and uncover the patterns in their behaviours by asking yourself bonus questions (page 2).



Interactive Signal List

Overt Interaction Signals:

1. Snarling: A direct and overt warning, often paired with showing teeth, signaling discomfort or threat.
2. Growling: A vocal indicator of tension or discomfort, often used to deter others.
3. Barking: May range from alert barks to excessive, repetitive barking in high-stress situations.
4. Play Bow: While typically an invitation to play, in tense environments it can be a displacement behaviour to diffuse tension.
5. Snapping: A quick, non-contact bite intended as a warning signal.
6. Blocking: Physically positioning themselves to control access to a resource.
7. Pawing: Lightly touching another dog, often to gain attention or assert dominance.
8. Circling: A form of heightened locomotor activity often seen in stressed dogs.

Subtle Interaction Signals

1. Body Positioning: Standing sideways or angled to block another dog's access to a resource.
2. Lip Licking: A stress signal or an attempt to appease another dog.
3. Head Turning: Avoiding direct eye contact to reduce tension.
4. Eye Contact: Prolonged staring can indicate a challenge; brief glances may show uncertainty.
5. Ear Position: Flattened ears signal fear or submission; pricked ears indicate heightened alertness.
6. Tail Positioning: A stiff, upright tail signals dominance, while a tucked tail indicates fear or submission.
7. Freezing or Stiffening: Abrupt cessation of movement, often signaling heightened tension.
8. Yawning: A displacement behaviour commonly seen during stress or uncertainty.
9. Panting: In non-heat-related contexts, panting can indicate stress or discomfort.
10. Ambivalent Postures: Mixed signals, such as partially raised hackles combined with averting eye contact, reflecting internal conflict.

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Bonus Questions:

1. Who you first saw the interaction, how did the first dog signal to the second dog?
2. What did your responding dog do?
3. Do certain signals happen in the same place or at specific times?

Draw here

