

King of the Mountain

Many animals live in groups. Bighorn sheep live in groups called herds. Species that live in groups often compete for dominance. Each sheep wants to have control or power over others.

If you are in a family with siblings, you might feel that a bigger or older brother or sister has more “power” or “rights” than you. Maybe the sibling gets to stay up later or takes your things or bullies you. It’s also possible that **you** may be the “big cheese” and be the one who gets your way in the family. Or, you may be picked on by some siblings and in turn may pick on others.

Just like in a human family, bighorn sheep in a herd try to establish dominance. The more dominant animal usually has first choice of food, shelter, or mates. Bighorn sheep have lots of

ways to show who is boss. If you watch a herd closely, you can identify the “top sheep,” the “bottom sheep,” and where all the rest fit in between.

Male sheep (rams) use their heads to establish dominance! Usually the ram with the largest and heaviest horns becomes “number one.” The rams



try to intimidate one another by standing and posing in ways that show their horns to the best advantage. For example, you may see a group of rams huddled like a football team. They are not planning their next touchdown. Rather, they are comparing each others horns! Sometimes rams show off their horns by holding their heads high and turning them side to side like fashion models. Or they may stretch their necks out, hold their heads low and twist their heads to display their impressive headgear.

Establishing dominance goes beyond showing off. Dominant rams will kick, butt, and get up on smaller males. Rams that are pretty equal in horn size often come to blows to establish their superiority. First they square off, rise up on their hind legs, and display their horns a bit. Then, they run at each other and slam their horns together.

The CRACK from the collision can be heard far away. These head-to-head encounters can last an entire day! Finally, the sore, dizzy loser just walks away.

Female sheep (ewes) also show dominance. It is easy to tell who's boss when the sheep are walking single file. In both male and female herds, the dominant sheep leads. The rest of the sheep follow in the order of their rank in the herd.

