



## **Dominance and Dog Training**

The use of dominance and pack theory in explaining dog behavior has come under a great deal of scrutiny as of late. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers wishes to inform the dog owning public about the ramifications of a reliance on dominance theory as it relates to understanding dogs, interpreting their behavior, and living harmoniously with our canine companions.

### **Theory and Misconceptions**

Contrary to popular thinking, research studies of wolves in their natural habitat demonstrate that wolves are not dominated by an "Alpha Wolf" that is the most aggressive male, or male-female pairing, of the pack. Rather, they have found that wolf packs are very similar to how human families are organized, and there is little aggression or fights for "dominance." Wolves, whether it be the parents or the cubs of a pack, depend on each other to survive in the wild; consequently wolves that engage in aggressive behaviors toward each other would inhibit the pack's ability to survive and flourish. While social hierarchies do exist (just as they do among human families) they are not related to aggression in the way it is commonly portrayed (incorrectly) in popular culture. As Senior Research Scientist L. David Mech recently wrote regarding his many years of study of wolves, we should "once and for all end the outmoded view of the wolf pack as an aggressive assortment of wolves consistently competing with each other to take over the pack." (Mech, 2008)

In addition to our new understanding of wolf behavior, study into canine behavior has found that dogs, while sharing some traits with their wolf cousins, have many more significant differences. As a result, the idea that dog behavior can be explained through the application of wolf behavior models is no more relevant than suggesting that chimpanzee behavior can be used to explain human behavior. Unfortunately, this idea that dogs are basically "domesticated wolves" living in our homes still persists among dog trainers and behavior counselors, as well as breeders, owners, and the media.

One of the biggest misconceptions we find ourselves faced with is the definition of "dominance." Dogs are often described as being "dominant" which is an incorrect usage of the term. Dominance is *not* a personality trait. Dominance is "primarily a descriptive term for relationships between pairs of individuals." and moreover, "the use of the expression 'dominant dog' is meaningless, since "dominance" can apply only to a relationship between individuals. (Bradshaw et al., 2009) Dominance comes into play in a relationship between members of the same species when one individual wants to have the first pick of available resources such as food, beds, toys, bones, etc.

Even between dogs, however, it is not achieved through force or coercion but through one member of the relationship deferring to the other peacefully. In many households the status of one dog over another is fluid; in other words, one dog may be the first to take his pick of toys, but will defer to the other dog when it comes to choice of resting places. Dogs that use aggression to "get what they want" are not displaying dominance, but rather anxiety-based behaviors, which will only increase if they are faced with verbal and/or physical threats from their human owners. Basing one's interaction with their dog on dominance is harmful to the dog-human relationship and leads to further stress, anxiety and aggression from the dog, as well as fear and antipathy of the owner.

### **Living with Dogs: What's Important?**

When it comes to living and working with dogs, the concept of dominance is largely irrelevant. This may come as a surprise to many dog owners. The truth is, when working with dogs that have a training or behavior issue, the goal of the dog professional is to develop a behavior modification or training plan that will address the problem at hand. This generally does not require understanding a dog's motivation and emotional state, but rather focuses on what the dog is *doing* (behavior), and what we want the dog to "do," helping the dog understand how to perform the desired behaviors and then rewarding him for doing so.

Far too many times dog owners have been given advice to "show the dog who's boss" and "be the alpha." The unfortunate side effect of this thinking is that it creates an adversarial relationship between the owner and their dog with the belief that the dog is somehow trying to control the home and the owner's life. Such misinformation damages the owner-dog relationship, and may lead to fear, anxiety and /or aggressive behaviors from the dog. Dogs cannot speak our language and they can find themselves thrust into situations in our homes that they find difficult to comprehend, by owners trying to behave as they mistakenly believe "alpha" wolves do.

Rather than dominance, it is most often a lack of clear interspecies communication that leads to behaviors we find troubling.. It is the human's responsibility to teach our dogs the behaviors that we find appropriate, and reward them when they do the things we like. Just as importantly, it is our role to show them which behaviors are not appropriate in a constructive and compassionate manner that does not lead to further anxiety on the dog's part.

### **Aggression is Not the Answer**

Actions such as "alpha rolls" and "scruff shakes" have no basis in fact when studying wolf or dog behavior, and they only lead to creating unnecessary fear on our dog's part toward us, fear that ultimately can lead to aggression because the frightened dog knows of no other way to protect itself other than using its teeth. We all owe it to our dogs to see the world from their point of view in order to create a more harmonious relationship. Whether we are looking at a dog or a wolf, actions such as grabbing a dog and forcing it into a down, growling at the dog, and other aggressive behaviors directed toward the animal will only lead to the animal developing a "fight-

or-flight" response where the animal fears for its life. In this situation, the dog will either freeze out of fear, flee far away from the threatening animal or person if an opportunity presents itself to get away, or, fight to save itself. When we engage in such behaviors toward our dogs, we are not telling the dog we are "boss," instead we are telling the dog we are dangerous creatures to be avoided or fought off. There is no "dominance" in these scenarios—only terror and the instinct to defend oneself against attack.

### **If Not Dominance, Then What Do We Use?**

Fortunately, many trainers and behavior professionals now present concepts that focus on building a caring and happy relationship with your dog, instead of relying on dominance. Some trainers refer to the term "leadership" or other similar terms that are less adversarial than "dominance" or "Alpha." What these trainers have in common is a desire to explain effective, non-confrontational and humane ways of living successfully with dogs. These educated approaches aim to strengthen the bond between the owner and the dog and teach owners more effective ways of communicating with another species. For dogs with behavior problems, trainers employ programs such as “Nothing in Life is Free (NILIF)” which works along the principal that the dog must “do” something to earn what he wants (i.e. sit to get dinner, walk on a loose leash to move forward, etc.) These programs are effective because the dog is issued a structured set of rules that are consistently reinforced and the dog learns what he needs to do in order to get the things that he wants such as food, petting, playtime, etc. Because dogs do not have the power of human speech and language, behavior problems and anxiety can result when they are left to fend for themselves in deciding how to live in our world without guidance that makes sense. Just like with people, we behave better and thrive in a world that “makes sense” to us and has a clear structure.

The myths that resonate in “dominance theory,” such as not allowing the dog to sleep on the bed, or eat first, or go through doorways first, have no bearing on whether or not the dog will look to the owner for guidance. The specific rules of the relationship are up to the owner and are based on what they want in their household. Humane, educated trainers should strive to teach owners to positively and gently influence and motivate their dogs to act in a manner that befits their own home and tailor the "rules" to each individual. There is no scientifically validated data to uphold the belief that you must eat before your dog, or keep them from sleeping on your bed, or walking in front of you, and owners should not be led to believe this and live in a state of fear and anxiety over their dog's possible takeover of their home. In fact, the vast majority of dogs and owners have wonderful, mutually-rewarding relationships—even if the dog is allowed to sleep on the bed, eats alongside the owner, and does many other things erroneously labeled “dominance.” To help illustrate some of the myths about dominance, we have prepared a related document, "Dominance Myths and Dog Training Realities."

## **Final Thoughts**

When choosing a trainer or behavior counselor to work with you and your dog, keep in mind that philosophies and methodologies among trainers varies. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers recommends interviewing potential trainers to determine their beliefs regarding dominance and using physical force and intimidation to train a dog, whether for obedience or for behavior problems. An educated canine professional should be well-acquainted with the latest scientific understandings of dog behavior and be willing to openly discuss their training methodologies with you.

## **For further reading:**

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior 2007. AVSAB Position Statement - Punishment Guidelines: The use of punishment for dealing with animal behavior problems. [http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/images/stories/Position\\_Statements/Combined\\_Punishment\\_Statements.pdf](http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/images/stories/Position_Statements/Combined_Punishment_Statements.pdf).

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior 2009. AVSAB Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory in Behavior Modification of animals. [http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/images/stories/Position\\_Statements/dominance%20statement.pdf](http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/images/stories/Position_Statements/dominance%20statement.pdf).

Bradshaw J.W.S., Blackwell E.J., Casey R.A. 2009. Dominance in domestic dogs - useful construct or bad habit? *Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research*, May/June 2009, pp 135-144.

Herron M.E., Shofer F.S., Reisner I.R. 2009. Survey of the use and outcome of confrontational and non-confrontational training methods in client-owned dogs showing undesired behaviors. *Applied Animal Behavior Science*, 117, pp. 47-54.

Mech L.D. 2008. Whatever happened to the term alpha wolf? *International Wolf*. (<http://www.wolf.org/wolves/news/iwmag/2008/winter/winter2008.asp>).

Yin S. 2009. Dominance vs. unruly behavior. *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog*, Mar/Apr 2009, pp. 13-17.

Yin S. 2009. *Low Stress Handling, Restraint, and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats*. Cattledog Publishing. Davis, CA.



## Dominance Myths and Dog Training Realities

As dog trainers and behavior counselors, we are often told by our dog owner clients that their dog is "dominant" because he or she did a particular behavior. In order to provide more insight into why dogs do the things they do, and why it is not "dominance" that leads to these behaviors, we've included a sampling of some of the most common ones below.

Behavior Myth	Why Your Dog Really Does This	How to Change the Behavior
Your dog barks at you to tell you he's in charge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are numerous underlying factors that can lead to excessive barking such as boredom, fear, and anxiety.</li> <li>• Owners often inadvertently reinforce barking by giving the dog attention when they are barking, or yelling at the dog, which only strengthens the behavior over time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train the dog to bark and be quiet on command.</li> <li>• Proper daily exercise, interaction with a dog's human family, and interactive toys such as Kongs® can decrease barking if the dog is barking out of boredom.</li> <li>• For fearful and/or anxious dogs, determine what is causing the dog's fears and work to desensitize him to them.</li> </ul>
Your dog urinates in the house to show you that she owns the "territory" and not you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconsistent houstraining techniques by the owner lead to dogs that are never 100% houstrained.</li> <li>• Inappropriate elimination can often be due to an underlying medical condition such as a urinary infection.</li> <li>• Unneutered dogs will mark territory more often than fixed dogs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Go back to "Square one" with your dog and begin houstraining again.</li> <li>• You must supervise your dog 100% and be able to take him out when he needs to go and reward him for doing so in order for him to clearly understand what is being asked of him.</li> <li>• Take your dog to a veterinarian to determine if there is a physical cause for the behavior.</li> </ul>
Your dog believes he is in control of the kitchen and is trying to eat before you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dogs are scavengers by nature and if food appears to be available, they will take the chance to "go for it!"</li> <li>• Dogs who are bored in the home may resort to counter surfing or digging in the trash to alleviate their boredom.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach your dog to stay out of the kitchen and not to jump on the counters.</li> <li>• Give your dog interactive toys to play with, such as Kongs that you can stuff with food, so he can be steered toward appropriate outlets for his energy.</li> </ul>

<p>Dogs jump up on people to assert their height and rank over you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dogs jump up because they have been inadvertently reinforced to do so by inconsistent dog owners.</li> <li>• Dogs jump up because they want to get closer to our faces to say hello.</li> <li>• Dogs jump up because ... it's fun!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach the dog to sit when visitors enter the house and reward for this behavior.</li> <li>• Teach the dog that he only gets attention, treats, etc. when he has all four paws on the floor.</li> <li>• Make sure everyone who interacts with your dog is on the same page about turning their back on the dog when he jumps up so the behavior is not reinforced in the future.</li> </ul>
<p>Dogs pull on leash so they can get out in front of you and be in charge of you and the walk.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If every time the dog gets to go on a walk, they pull you along without being taught any different, they reasonably understand that this is how walks are supposed to be!</li> <li>• Getting to go on a walk is a fun-filled and exciting activity for a dog. They pull because they're enthusiastic and want to get out and enjoy the sights and smells of the outdoors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be absolutely consistent with your dog and do not allow him or her to pull you when you go out on a walk. Take the time to teach them what it is that you do want.</li> <li>• Reinforce the dog heavily for staying next to you, and do not allow the dog to move forward if he is pulling. Teach the dog the "heel" command.</li> <li>• If your dog is too strong for you, use a management device such as a head halter or front clip harness, and use this <i>in conjunction with</i> teaching the dog not to pull so that you can transition to using only a flat collar.</li> </ul>
<p>Dogs push you out of the way and run through a doorway ahead of you to show you they're in charge.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just like with walking on leash, dogs get easily excited and don't know this is unacceptable behavior if you don't teach them otherwise.</li> <li>• You only get pushed because you're in the way of whatever it is on the other side that the dog finds interesting and exciting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach your dog a wait command (or stay command) in door ways and practice so they become used to the idea that you get to come and go first.</li> <li>• Use baby-gates to block the dog from running through the house and use them to teach behavior such as wait, stay or sit at doorways.</li> </ul>
<p>Dogs who think they are boss will ignore you when you call them because they know they don't have to obey.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dogs who have not been properly reinforced for coming back to you when called will not understand that "come" means "come here immediately!"</li> <li>• Dogs become stimulated by their environment and can be easily</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach your dog the come command on-leash until your dog is coming every time when called.</li> <li>• Reinforce the dog heavily when he does come - it should be 100% clear to him that he did a great thing by</li> </ul>

	<p>distracted by other dogs or animals, people, children, grass, trees, cars, etc.</p>	<p>complying.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Never punish the dog if he doesn't come to you - this only teaches the dog that coming to you when he is called is not a "safe" thing to do.</li> </ul>
<p>Dogs mount other dogs or people to show that they are dominant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mounting occurs for several reasons which include stress alleviation and play.</li> <li>• When dogs play they will often take turns mounting each other for fun - the position is one of playfulness rather than an attempt to establish status.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the dog is doing this to you, simply give the dog an incompatible behavior to do instead and reward them for doing so, such as sit, down, a trick, or anything else.</li> </ul>
<p>Dogs get on the furniture and/or beds to show that they rule the household.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dogs get on furniture and/or beds for the same reasons that people do - because they're very comfortable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach your dog an "off" command so they learn to get down off the furniture when you ask them to.</li> <li>• If you do not want your dog on the furniture at any time, manage the household so that the dog is not able to get up on the furniture unawares. If they do, this reinforces that it's ok to sit on the furniture - you want to be able to block this from happening using baby gates, tethers, etc.</li> <li>• Provide the dog with a comfy dog bed or beds of his own and reinforce the dog for choosing to lay on them.</li> <li>• Finally, if you don't mind having your dog on the furniture but are afraid this means they're dominating you - relax! As long as you are setting the rules and guidelines in your house, it's ok for your dog to be on the furniture with you.</li> </ul>