

APDT POSITION STATEMENT DOMINANCE AND DOG TRAINING

The use of dominance and pack theory in explaining dog behavior has come under a great deal of scrutiny in recent years. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT) would like to inform the dog owning public about the ramifications of a reliance on dominance theory as it relates to understanding dogs, interpreting canine 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 function in a way that is 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. 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 while dogs do share some traits with their wolf cousins, dogs and wolves are different in many significant ways. In other words, 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, the idea that dogs are basically "domesticated wolves" living in our homes still persists among dog trainers and behavior consultants, 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. They are displaying anxiety-based behaviors, which will tend to increase if the dog is confronted with verbal and/or physical threats from the human owners. Basing one's interaction with a 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 that 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 addresses the problem at hand. For the most part, this does not require understanding a dog's motivation and emotional state. Instead, the training or behavior modification plan should focus on what the dog is *doing* (behavior), what we want the dog to do instead, helping the dog understand how to perform the desired behaviors, and then reinforcing 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 the dog, due to the belief that the dog is somehow trying to control the home and the owner's life. Such misinformation damages the owner-dog relationship, leading to fear, anxiety and/or aggressive behavior from the dog. Dogs cannot speak our language, so they can be thrust into situations in our homes that they find difficult to comprehend when owners try 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 the dog the behaviors that we find appropriate, and reward the dog for doing things we like. Just as importantly, it is our role to show dogs which behaviors are not appropriate in a constructive and compassionate manner that does 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 the science of wolf or dog behavior. In fact, they actually create unnecessary fear in the dog, fear that can ultimately lead to aggression because the frightened dog knows no other way to protect itself 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 the animal and forcing it into a down, growling at the animal, and other aggressive behaviors directed toward the animal will only lead to the animal developing a "fight-or-flight" response, because the animal fears for its life. In this situation, the dog will either freeze out of fear, flee from the threatening animal or

person if there is an opportunity to get away, or fight to save itself. When we engage in confrontational behaviors such as alpha rolling our dogs, we are not telling the dog we are "boss." Instead, we are teaching the dog that we are dangerous creatures that should 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 use techniques that focus on building a caring and happy relationship with dogs, instead of relying on dominance. What these trainers have in common is a desire to promote effective, non-confrontational and humane ways of living successfully with dogs. These educated approaches aim to strengthen the bond between owner and 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 on 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 has a structured set of rules that are consistently reinforced, so the dog learns what he needs to do 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 often result when dogs are left to fend for themselves in deciding how to live in our world, without guidance that makes sense. This is the same for people; we behave better, and ultimately thrive, in a world that makes sense to us and has clear, consistent boundaries and rules.

The myths that resonate in “dominance theory,” such as not allowing the dog to sleep on the bed, 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 the owner wants in the 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 prevent them from walking in front of you. Owners should not be led to believe these ideas or any others like them, since that may cause them to 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 address 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 consultant to work with you and your dog, keep in mind that philosophies and methodologies vary among trainers. The Association of Pet Dog Trainers recommends interviewing potential trainers to determine their thoughts regarding dominance and the use of 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 understanding 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.

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.

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. What ever 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.

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