



Pet Behavior Counseling

Helping you and your pet become best friends for life.

DOMINANCE: REALITY OR MYTH

If you attended a dog training class in the 1970's through the 1990's, if you read any dog training books written during this period, or if you have had any behavioral issues with your dog, then you have most likely heard about dominance. You were probably told that in order to prevent your dog from becoming dominant that you had to: 1) always go through doorways first, 2) always eat before your dog, 3) never allow the dog on furniture where they might be elevated above you, 4) never allow the dog to sleep on your bed, 5) punish your dog for stealing or chewing your stuff, 6) push your dog away when they jump up or paw at you, and 7) never let your dog pull on leash. Essentially you were told that you had to be ever vigilant and that you had to show your dog that you were the boss in order to prevent him from taking over your home.

The Myth

The concept of the dominant dog is based on a "theory" of how wolves interact socially within their pack. This theory described wolves as having a strict, force-based hierarchical structure where one male and one female are always the dominant ones in the group. These dominant wolves supposedly have first access to desired resources: food, water, resting places and a mate, and are willing to fight to maintain them. According to this concept, the other wolves in the pack are often constantly challenging the alphas so that they can overthrow them and take their position. Since wolves and dogs are biologically the same species, believers in this theory made the assumption that dogs must also be struggling for dominance amongst each other and with us.

The Reality

While we know that wolves and dogs are **biologically** the same, we also know that **behaviorally** they are very different. On page 24 in the book *Dogs*, biologist Dr. Raymond Coppinger states: "*Dogs may well be closely related to wolves but that does not mean they behave like wolves. People are closely related to chimps but that doesn't make us a subspecies of chimpanzees. Nor does it mean we behave like chimps¹.*" Coppinger goes on to explain some of the differences between dogs and wolves: 1) dogs are not as quick at learning and have poor problem solving skills, 2) dogs have smaller brains, 3) dogs are easily tamed, 4) dogs are better scavengers, and 5) even when feral, dogs do not have a pack structure. As Coppinger states on page 67: "*I don't think a dog knows what people are talking about when they exhibit this "alpha wolf" behavior. Dogs do not understand such behaviors because the village dogs didn't have a pack structure; they were semi solitary animals.*" *In fact, contrary to popular belief,*

dogs around the world do not (or only rarely) exhibit 'pack' behavior." Coppinger's observations are made based on his study of dogs throughout the world.

We now know that even wolf packs in the wild do NOT have a strict, force-based hierarchical structure. In *Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs*, biologist L. D. Mech notes "... *in natural wolf packs, the alpha male or female are merely the breeding animals, the parents of the pack, and dominance contests with other wolves are rare, if they exist at all. During my 13 summers observing the Ellesmere Island pack, I saw none.*" What Mech observed was a family of wolves: a breeding pair and pups. The breeding pair provides for and raises the young until such time that they move on to start their own pack and families. This is how a typical wolf pack in the wild interacts.

If My Dog Is Not Dominant, What is its Problem?

So, if wolves do not have a rigid force-based hierarchy and dogs are not really wolves and do not form a dominance hierarchy, why then do some dogs exhibit some of the obnoxious, undesirable behaviors which in the past have been attributed to dominance? I believe there are 8 reasons we see these undesirable behaviors in dogs:

Failure to manage the dog and its environment – Dogs are scavengers and are always looking for food. If your dog steals a steak off the countertop it is not because they are trying to become dominant, it is because we left the dog and the item in a situation where this could happen. We need to take advantage of the fact that we are smarter than the dog and be responsible by managing the environment so that this does not happen. If a dog is successful in a behavior, it will be repeated, not because it is dominant but because it has learned the behavior is rewarding.

Failure to train the dog – Too few people take the time to take their dog through at least one training class. These are the people who usually end up with a dog that is then labeled "dominant". Every dog needs to be trained and needs to be trained for life. The best way to train any animal, dog or human, is by rewarding the dog for behaviors we like.

Unrealistic expectations – Many people expect dogs to be furry little people with human values and morals. They do not like that dogs exhibit normal canine behaviors such as mounting other dogs, sniffing dog butts, and jumping up on people, just to name a few. Some of the behaviors we find undesirable are perfectly normal for a canine. To not accept these behaviors is simply unrealistic. However, if we find a behavior such as mounting undesirable, we can easily teach our dog a behavior such as "off," which gives them something else to do, which is mutually exclusive to mounting.

Unintentional training – Many people do not realize that they are rewarding the dog for the behaviors they do not like. Chasing the dog when he steals a sock rewards the dog for stealing, pushing him off when he jumps up rewards him for jumping, and letting him go forward with the leash tight is rewarding him for pulling on leash. We cannot blame the dog when we reward these undesirable behaviors.

Allowing the dog to train you - A lot of "dominance" issues involve dogs that have essentially become spoiled brats. Their guardians have not taken the time to learn about dogs but instead treat the dog as if it were a furry child, allowing the dog to train them. Dogs do what works, and if they find they can stay on the couch by growling or

get attention by pawing at you, then that is what they are going to do. These dogs are not dominant; they have quite simply done a very effective job of training you, instead of you training them.

Physical Punishment – People who choose to train their dog with physical punishment are more likely to see “dominant” like behaviors such as growling, because they put their dog in a position of fearing for their safety. Tools such as shock collars and choke collars are designed to cause the dog fear and pain. When your dog is afraid or feels pain he will respond accordingly. Rather than rewarding desirable behaviors, these people focus on punishing for undesirable behaviors and in so doing create a dog that is always on the defensive and afraid that making the wrong choice will cause pain.

Failure to meet the dog’s needs – While not really associated with dominance, a common reason for undesirable behaviors in dogs is our failure to meet the dog’s needs for physical exercise and mental stimulation. Stealing a sock or your underwear is a great way for the dog to get the attention from you he wants and needs. To a dog, it can be very rewarding to be chased and yelled at, especially if this is the only exercise their guardian provides.

Undesirable behaviors in dogs that are attributed to “dominance” are not due to a pack driven instinct of the dog, but rather are due to our failure to take responsibility for the dog’s needs, and to properly, humanely train ourselves and our dog. If a dog is “dominant” it’s because we have trained them to be so.

Strive to be good guardians and provide your dogs with everything they need, including food, water, shelter, training, mental stimulation, physical exercise and common sense management. Then they will not learn the undesirable behaviors that in the past have been erroneously attributed to dominance.

Originally published in Green Acres Kennel Shop P^{aw} Prints, September 2002.

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For a more information on the dominance myth, we recommend the following books and articles:

Books

Dogs: A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior and Evolution, Raymond and Lorna Coppinger, University of Chicago Press, 2001

Dominance: Fact or Fiction, Barry Eaton, 2002, A summary of the newest research on dominance theory, and why it is no longer a good model for canine behavior. [Green Acres Price - \$7.95]

Dominance Theory and Dogs Version 1.0, James O’Heare, DogPsych Publishing, 2003, A discussion of dominance theory and how it applies to canine behavior. [Green Acres Price - \$19.95]

Articles

AVSAB Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory in the Behavior of Animals - <http://tiny.cc/BoliX>

AVSAB Position Statement on the Use of Punishment for the Behavior Modification of Animals - <http://tiny.cc/p5jYg>

Alpha Status, Dominance and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs – Dr. Mech-
<http://tiny.cc/ycQeU>

Dominance in domestic dogs—useful construct or bad habit? - John W. S. Bradshaw, Emily J. Blackwell, Rachel A. Casey, Journal of Veterinary Behavior (2009) 4, 135-144

Using 'Dominance' To Explain Dog Behavior Is Old Hat – ScienceDaily -
<http://tinyurl.com/pm8ghw>

If You're Aggressive, Your Dog Will Be too, Say Veterinary Study – Science Daily -
<http://tinyurl.com/cmwuln>

Moving Beyond the Dominance Myth – Morgan Spector – Tufts Animal Expo Proceedings, 2001 - <http://tinyurl.com/yppaml>