

HOW TO BE THE LEADER OF YOUR “PACK”

TO DOMINATE OR NOT TO DOMINATE: THAT IS THE QUESTION

Do you need to show your dog who’s boss? In order to be a good “dog parent,” must you assume the role of “alpha” in your household? Do your dog’s behavior problems stem from a burning desire to climb the social ladder? Is your dog planning a coup?! You might think so, if you’ve taken advice from well-meaning but misinformed fellow dog owners—or popular television personalities who claim to magically turn wayward pet dogs into perfect companions, just by asserting their “dominance.”

According to advocates of training methods based on dominance theory, achieving alpha-dog status through physical punishment and intimidation works as the ultimate behavioral fix for issues ranging from pulling on leash and jumping up to fear and aggression problems. However, despite the popularity of the “alpha” idea among the dog-owning public, the overwhelming majority of dog behavior experts and qualified veterinary behaviorists agree that it isn’t only outdated and based on invalid information—it’s also dangerous and can needlessly damage dog owners’ relationships with their pets.

SO WHERE DID THIS “ALPHA” STUFF COME FROM?

“Dominance theory” is a hypothetical scientific idea referring to relationships among animals that live together in groups. It has been used to describe the social behavior of bees, chickens, wolves, primates and other species. Ideas concerning dominance as it applies to domestic dogs originate from research done on wolf packs. The commonly held belief, boiled down, is that every wolf pack has an “alpha dog” that rules the group, consistently asserting his dominance over other members of the pack to gain access to the best food, mates, sleeping places, etc.

IS IT TRUE?

Not exactly. Certainly, it’s true that animals develop complex relationships with each other in order to survive in social groups. We’ve all seen dogs use body language to communicate and settle disputes over resources, like food and toys. However, there are some major problems with applying the idea of dominance theory to domestic dogs and their relationships with people.

- First of all, people aren’t dogs. Why assume your relationship with your dog would mirror his relationships with other members of his own species? That’s kind of a stretch, isn’t it?
- Secondly, dogs aren’t wolves. Our domesticated companions are definitely different than their canid cousins in many ways. The idea that information gathered from the observation of wolves should directly apply to pet dogs simply isn’t solid.
- Furthermore, a great deal of the aforementioned research done on wolf packs is fundamentally flawed and now considered scientifically invalid. Early researchers made some significant mistakes. They studied lots of *captive* wolf packs (which is really a bit like trying to draw conclusions about the social interaction of human families by studying a bunch of human prisoners in a jail, according to scientist David Mech). Data wasn’t gathered through the observation of wolves in natural settings, performing natural behaviors. Additionally, scientists misunderstood some of the wolf body language that they observed. They originally thought that higher-ranking wolves in a pack maintain their status by “rolling” or “pinning” underlings to keep them in their place. In actuality, lower-ranking animals *voluntarily* lie down, roll over and perform other submissive behaviors in the presence of socially superior wolves.

They aren't forced to do so at all. They're using body language to communicate—not getting squashed by larger, more powerful “alpha wolves.”

- One of the very few scientific studies on domestic dog hierarchies, performed and documented by veterinary behaviorist and trainer Dr. Ian Dunbar, indicated that dogs in stable groups form relationships that are much more complex than those involved in a simple “pecking order.” For instance, if there's a bone up for grabs and Rover and Fluffy both want it, Rover will almost always pull rank and get it—unless Fluffy already *possesses* the bone (usually, possession is 10/10 of the law if you're a female dog). If Rover and Buster both want the bone, Buster will almost always get it. But if *Fluffy* and Buster want the bone, Fluffy will always get it.

If Spot and any other dog in the group both want the bone, Spot will never get it. On the other hand, if it's a squeaky toy, rather than a bone, and Spot wants *that*, all the other dogs will yield the toy to Spot—presumably because it isn't a high-value item for the other dogs, but it is for Spot. See how complicated this can get? According to Dunbar's study, the dog with “dominant” status changes, depending on the relationships between individual animals in specific contexts. It's not a case of ONE “alpha dog” ruling the roost, and all other pack members obediently falling into line.

IS IT USEFUL?

Nah, not really. Even if all that “alpha dog” business was based on accurate facts, which it's not, it would have nothing to do with modifying your dog's behavior. Rolling your dog over onto his back, shaking his scruff, and worrying about which one of you gets to eat dinner first isn't going to teach him anything. Don't worry about all that “assert your dominance” mumbo-jumbo. It's irrelevant. Read on for some tips that WILL help you teach your dog to follow the rules that you make for him.

IS IT SAFE?

Absolutely not. Proponents of dominance theory recommend using a bunch of punitive and unnecessarily harsh training methods that can be, at best, pretty ineffective. At worst, they are downright dangerous.

The Alpha Roll

“Alpha rolling” refers to the practice of manually putting your dog onto his side or back and then holding him down, in an attempt to mimic what people erroneously think an alpha dog or alpha wolf might do to assert dominance over a lower-ranking animal. (The idea is that once you achieve the rank of “alpha,” your dog will respect and automatically obey you.) As we stated above, this technique is based on misinformation. But, forgetting that altogether, it simply isn't safe. Although some pet dogs will tolerate this kind of treatment, alpha rolling upsets many others, sometimes causing fearful or aggressive behavior. Some dogs, probably moved to defend themselves when their owners suddenly “attack,” snap or bite. Other dogs just learn to avoid or distrust their human companions. Either way, the fallout frequently causes stress for both owners and their dogs.

Show Your Dog Who's Boss, But Be a NICE Boss

Be a leader, not a bully. Why play the tyrant when you can, just as effectively, provide benevolent guidance instead? Before you swallow what your neighbor—or any charismatic TV “experts”—tells you about the necessity of dominating your dog, remember two things:

- All that stuff isn't based on accurate scientific information.
- It may actually lead you to do unnecessarily unpleasant things to your best friend. There's a better, gentler way to get your dog to do what you want.

Control the Resources

Guess what? YOU have opposable thumbs. You can use them to open dog food cans, throw tennis balls, turn doorknobs, put on leashes, give belly rubs—and accomplish just about everything else that’s important to your dog. You are the King or Queen of All Good Stuff for Dogs. All you have to do is control your dog’s access to that good stuff. If you do, you will *automatically* achieve leader status.

Here’s how it works: You make all the rules. Decide what you want your dog to do. Then ask your dog to do those things to get what he wants. First, you’ll obviously need to teach your dog how to understand what you’re asking of him. (Ask us if you’d like information about finding a good obedience class that will teach you how to communicate well with your dog, using modern methods based on positive reinforcement.) Once he understands you, simply require your dog to perform behaviors you like to earn what he desires in life. Does he want to go outside to play? Ask him to look at you before you open the door. Does he want dinner or a tasty treat? Ask him to lie down before giving him the goods. Does he want to greet visitors at the front door? Great! Ask him to sit politely for petting. If he doesn’t comply, that’s fine. He simply doesn’t get his reward, whatever it may be at the time. No yelling, whacking, alpha rolling or dominating necessary. If you’re consistent about the rules you make, your dog will catch on—and discover that it’s definitely in his best interest to comply with your wishes.

RESOURCES

If you’d like to speak with one of our experts about this or any other subject relating to dog behavior, please call our **Behavior Helpline: 804-643-SPCA**. We’d be happy to help.