



The Use of Dominance in Dog Training

Part I - Right Idea, Wrong Reason

Part II - Myths and Facts

Part III - Leadership in Dog Training

Part I - Right Idea, Wrong Reason

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Right Idea, Wrong Reason

How would one characterize a child who has temper tantrums when things don't go his way? He won't share toys with others, he does anything to get attention, and he won't comply with anything his parents tell him. You would likely call him a brat, rude, or spoiled. When a dog behaves in the same manner, how would one characterize him? Most likely as wanting to be in charge, being dominant, or trying to be the alpha dog. Why is it that we characterize ill-behaved dogs as status climbing creatures staging a coup d'état attempt of our authority over them?

We inappropriately characterize so many behaviors as dominance and then conclude that strong leadership is necessary in order to show the dog who is boss. When dogs are pushy, rude, attention seeking, ill-behaved, or non-compliant, they are not trying to obtain status. They are trying to fulfill their own needs in the only way they know how. Dogs DO need leadership in order to learn how to behave properly in our home and families. But it is not necessarily because they are trying to be dominant. This is a classic example of the right idea (dogs need leadership) for the wrong reason (because they are trying to be dominant.)

Thirty years ago, experts studied wolves to understand dog behavior and made some erroneous assumptions. It was assumed that dogs were trying to climb the social hierarchy ladder and this is what was causing behavior problems in our homes. It was assumed that there was an upset in rank order of the household. It was concluded that the way to resolve this was through dominance training.

Owners were told that dogs that engaged in the following behaviors were trying to be dominant: leaning on people, pawing or nuzzling for attention, going through doorways before people, pulling on a leash, eliminating in the house, getting up on furniture, sleeping in bed with owners, not coming when called, not complying with commands, barking to get attention, etc. Owners were told that in order to be the alpha dog they had to eat before their dog eats, go through doorways first, not allow their dog on furniture, not allow their dog to get their attention without first complying with a command, not allow their dog to sleep in bed with them, etc. This advice was intended to show the dog that the human was boss and establish the proper hierarchy in the house. But those conclusions were faulty! (*See the section on Myths & Facts.*) Again, another example of the right idea for the wrong reason. Dogs engage in those behaviors because those things work to get our attention or to get whatever it is they want. We should not conclude that dogs are trying to be dominant when they just haven't been trained to our expectations.

So why does dominance training often work to improve behavior? Why has dominance theory in training persisted despite further research which dispels this? When an owner controls the things a dog wants, the dog's behavior will change in order to find a new way to obtain those things. Dogs learn to repeat what works and stop doing what doesn't work. This is why dogs chase cats and not trees. It works to chase cats because they run - trees don't run! These things cause changes in behavior because a dog's experience is altered which produces learning. By changing the outcome of these sequences and providing the proper feedback, we are shaping their behavior. In doing so, we are more in control and we are teaching dogs to look for and respond to our cues for behavior. They learn to do what we want in order to get what they want. It just works better this way! For example, dogs learn not to jump to get a treat because it doesn't work. Sitting is what enables a dog to get the treat.

Training causes dogs to think and encourages impulse control. This desired change in behavior is a result of the scientific principles of conditioning, not a result of the dog suddenly respecting your authority. Yes, we are providing leadership for dogs but not because they are trying to take over. Without leadership and training, we end up with dogs that are rude, pushy, untrained, uncontrolled, and often times unlikeable and even embarrassing!

Popular books and TV shows often have the right idea for the wrong reason. The right idea: owners should be leaders. They should be confident, calm, and assertive. They shouldn't freely allow their dogs to have access to everything. Dogs should have a job and a role in the household. The wrong reason: because dogs are trying to be dominant, in charge, and trying to be the boss, etc. Practitioners should not continue to use dominance as the basis of and solution to dog behavior problems. It is based on outdated research and faulty science.

Let's face it, we all want what we want and we want as much control as we can have. As adults, we have learned that having a temper tantrum doesn't get us what we want. Being overbearing and rude doesn't make people respect us - rather it makes people avoid and dislike us. We have learned appropriate ways to obtain the things we want and appropriate ways to interact with others. We learn these things based on the feedback we get. We are constantly making adjustments to our approach in order to be more likely to get what we want. It is no different with dogs. By training our dogs and providing leadership, they learn to adjust their behavior which will make them more likely to get what they want. We all learn what works and what doesn't work.

Why is it important to get the right idea for the right reason?

- The assumption that dogs need to be shown who is boss can lead to inappropriate training techniques. This can cause tremendous stress and frustration for the dog as well as the owner.
- Operating on the premise that dogs need you to be in charge fails to account for the complexities of dog behavior problems. There are many reasons for problem behavior (e.g., fear, conflict, previously permitted behavior, insecurity, etc.) This certainly indicates that dogs aren't simply trying to be dominant.
- This one-size-fits-all training also fails to account for the array of dog personalities, their differing learning styles, differing needs, and differing experiences, etc.
- The personality of the owners must also come into play when training dogs. Often, owners don't want to be the leader because it has a negative connotation. They think they have to be mean to their dog in order to be in charge. This leads to avoidance of training and failure to resolve problems.

- Assuming a dog with aggressive behavior needs leadership to “show him who is boss” can exacerbate the problem. Aggression is often about insecurity, conflict, and fear. Dominance-based training can cause the dog to become defensive and thereby more aggressive.
- If dominance-based training does work for aggressive behavior, it often only works for the person having the most authority. This leaves others including children unable to control the dog’s behavior.
- Finally, it creates an adversarial relationship with our dogs because there is an assumption that we are in a fight to be in charge.

Dogs are wonderful companions! They are complex, sentient beings that learn just like we do - based on experiences; repeating what works and abandoning what doesn’t work. Dogs deserve the most companionate and humane training methods. They deserve to have a relationship with their families that is not adversarial. They deserve to be properly understood instead of labeled and oversimplified. Training and behavior modification is not one-size-fits-all. We must use science to modify behavior, not anecdotal advice from others. Through education and a proper understanding of dog behavior, we can have everything: leadership; polite, well-mannered dogs; and a rewarding, commensal relationship.

Part II - Myths and Facts

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There is so much misunderstanding with regard to dominance and dogs. Unfortunately, so many people in the dog training and behavior industry use inappropriate data, faulty science, and myths that have been around for a long time when referring to dominance. We have addressed six common myths with dominance in dog training and dog behavior.

Myth #1: Dominance refers to the way a high-ranking wolf or dog maintains control over its subordinates.

The truth behind the myth: It is perhaps ironic that a term that has come to mean so much pertaining to dog originated in the 1930s with respect to birds. Chickens, the subjects of the first study of social dominance have a strict (or linear) hierarchy where the highest ranking chicken, the ‘alpha’ has the most access to seed, and can peck all of the other chickens without fear of retaliation. The second highest-ranking chicken, the ‘beta’, has access to the second highest amount of seed, and can peck any other chicken besides the alpha without fear of retaliation. It is from this behavior that the term ‘pecking order’ comes. Dominance can be defined, then, as: the ability to maintain or control access to resources. In the case of chickens, the resource is primarily seed.

Of course, the usage of the term dominance as it pertains to domestic dogs stems not from its observation in chickens, but in dogs’ ancestors, wolves. Wolves, like chickens, also have a social hierarchy. However, unlike chickens, who live with an “all chickens for themselves” mentality, wolves live and work cooperatively. They must live and function as a group. Working together, they can hunt prey that is larger than they are, maintain “safety in numbers” and work together to raise pups. This behavior necessitates a social hierarchy for the purpose of keeping things in order to maintain group harmony. If all wolves in a pack were vying for the same resources (the best or most food, the best sleeping locations, and mating rights), the

resulting fights would place all the wolves in the pack in jeopardy. Unlike chickens, for whom aggression (pecking) and dominance are completely linked, social dominance in a pack is not about behaving aggressively—instead, it is about avoiding aggression. To summarize, dominance is not a means of controlling subordinates. It is about controlling access to resources, and its primary purpose is to avoid aggression and maintain group order.

Myth #2: Dominance is established by means of aggression.

The truth behind the myth: It is important to note that dominance and aggression are not at all synonymous. The displays of dominance and submission are an elaborate way for both wolves and dogs to avoid aggression. Although there are certainly times when a more dominant wolf or dog will behave aggressively to maintain control of a resource, most often there will be an understanding of the ‘rules’ that state that the more dominant wolf or dog has the right to the resource in question. In fact, dominance is not even as much determined by the behavior of the dominant dog as it is about the subordinates. That is, by accepting the leadership and control of resources of the dominant dog, the subordinates grant that dog the right to those resources. In fact, those who study wolves have found that Alpha-wolves who maintain their control with excessive aggression do not maintain alpha status for long. Instead, the lower ranking wolves typically kill or banish such a leader.

Myth #3: Dogs view their canine and human family members as pack-mates just like wolves.

The truth behind the myth: Although the evidence demonstrates that dogs evolved primarily from wolves, dogs differ from wolves in several important ways. First, because domestic dogs co-evolved with humans, who provide for their every need, the need to live and work together as a group does not exist as it did in their wolf ancestors. Thus, the need for a relatively strict social hierarchy is not present. Instead, dogs have what can be referred to as a more fluid hierarchy. Wolves maintain a fairly consistent ranking, and the most dominant, or “alpha” wolf controls access to virtually all of the important resources. The ranking of domestic dogs within a family, however, varies depending on the importance of each individual resource to each individual dog. One dog in a family, for example, might expect to control all of the toys in the household. Another might expect the best resting areas or access to the owner. If you have more than one dog, spend some time carefully observing their behavior. Most often, you will notice that different resources are important to different dogs, and each will be dominant over the resources they care most about. Misunderstandings about the fluid nature of domestic dogs’ social dominance hierarchy can lead to the idea that one dog is always the ‘alpha’ or highest ranking dog. This can lead to problems among pet dogs that don’t typically occur in a wolf pack. While there are certainly families in which one dog is clearly more dominant or more of a leader, more often, dogs negotiate their shared dominance. Problems between family dogs arise when two dogs both find the same resource important.

This notion of social dominance is also important when considering the oft-given advice that insists that humans must be viewed as “alpha” over pet dogs in the family. It is important for pet owners to maintain control over certain resources the dog views as valuable. Unfortunately, many of the methods suggested to help owners obtain “alpha” status are not based on a true understanding of canine behavior. By understanding the origins of the dominance concept and how it relates to the domestic dog, pet owners will be better equipped to judge the validity of behavior and training suggestions they encounter.

Myth #4: Dominant behaviors in domestic dogs arise because the dogs do not respect the owners' "alpha" status.

The truth behind the myth: Many behaviors common to domestic dogs have been attributed to expressions of dominance. Does your dog push through doorways ahead of you? Does he bark or paw at you for attention? Does your dog pull on a leash so he is always ahead of you on a walk? Does he insist on being fed before your family sits down for dinner? Will your dog protest if you try to move him from a favored resting place? Will he growl if you try to take a prized possession (like a rawhide bone) away from him? Many sources of behavior and training information suggest that these behaviors clearly indicate that the dog is behaving 'dominantly' and is therefore trying to take over the 'alpha position' of the household. These sources suggest that ineffective leadership has led the dog to try to assert his own leadership over his family members, and that the way to resolve these issues is to ensure that the owner regains the respect and leadership afforded to the alpha wolf. But this is a gross oversimplification of the concept of social hierarchy. This oversimplification can lead owners to attempt ineffective or even harmful methods of trying to "show their dog who is boss."

By understanding that dominance is not established by maintaining control over another individual but about controlling the resources important to that individual, dog owners will be able to teach their dogs appropriate ways to earn the things that are valuable to them. When evaluating suggestions for dealing with problem behaviors, particularly when those suggestions are based on a notion of dominance, pet owners should ask themselves if the suggested remedy is about controlling the dog or controlling the dog's resources.

Myth #5: Playing "Tug-of-War" games causes dogs to be competitive and teaches them to be dominant.

The truth behind the myth: The rationale behind this myth states that if dogs are allowed to play competitive tug-of-war games with their owners, they will learn that they can compete for dominant status with those owners. This notion is based on the idea that dog's ancestors, wolves, tug and compete for resources and that the wolf who wins these competitions is more dominant than the loser. In fact, this belief is somewhat misleading. Some variations of this myth suggest Tug-of-War games are ok as long as the humans initiate and finish the game, and that the object being tugged ends up in the position of the human.

In reading the earlier in this article, you have probably recognized that because they involve a prized resource (the tug toy!) tug-of-war games are, in fact, related to dominance. However, playing tug does not necessarily lead to a dog believing that he is dominant over people! Instead, tug is a wonderful way to teach a dog many types of boundaries. Tug can be used to teach dogs to drop an item on command, offer behaviors to receive the toy, and to wait to take the item until told. Each of these lessons can help dogs recognize that their owners are in control over the resources in question. This sounds a lot like helping the dogs recognize the owner's dominance, doesn't it?! By recognizing and utilizing the true nature of dominance, owners can use a fun game to teach boundaries and respect to their four-legged companions.

Myth #6: In order to assert your dominance over your dog, you must always eat before him.

The truth behind the myth: The idea behind this myth is that in wolves, the alpha wolf eats before all others, and the least dominant wolf eats last. By showing your pet dog that you eat

first, he purportedly will learn that you hold a higher status than he does. Again, this is an oversimplification of wolf behavior. In fact, ethologists (i.e., people who study animal behavior) have observed that the “alpha eats first” rule is not always the case. Instead, the hungriest wolves eat first with rank determining their priority of order as to who gets the richest areas on the carcass. Necessity and drive determines who gets to the carcass first, not respect. Further, recall that by domesticating the dog, humans have removed the need for pack cooperation. Instead, today’s pet dogs don’t usually have to hunt and kill their own food. It comes right to them, in a bowl! Thus, making parallels between wolf and dog behavior in this case can be misleading. It is important to note, however, that a dog’s food is in fact a prized resource. By maintaining control over that resource, therefore, humans attain a degree of status, whether or not the human eats before the dog. Pet owners can teach their dogs that in order to get their dinner; they must offer a desired behavior.

The science of dog behavior is multi-faceted and very complex. Mistakes are made when trying to simplify things by creating these one-size-fits-all guiding principles. There are so many misconceptions with regard to dog training and dog behavior. The problem is that these misconceptions lead to ineffective and often inappropriate training methods as well as a completely inaccurate framework for resolving problems. It is critical that pet owners receive expert professional help for training and behavior problems. A look at true dog behavior can dispel these myths and provide a proper framework when working with our beloved canine companions.

The next and final section will deal with some of the concepts we have addressed already and help you to know how to properly use dominance or leadership when training your dog.

Part III - Leadership in Dog Training

By: Sam Kabbel, CPDT-KA, President

Leadership in dog training can be a very confusing subject and yet it is so incredibly important. Unfortunately, many people think of leadership as a pejorative. They associate leadership with force, superiority, and domination, as if leadership is about being tough instead of being loving. Leadership is about being dominant and teaching your dog how to behave. Remember, dominance is defined as the ability to control or regulate access to resources. The parent that controls a teenager's access to the car is in charge of that resource and therefore acting as a leader. The parent determines if, when, where, and how the teenager is able to use the car and establishes the rules that must be followed in order to have access. With dogs, it is about a human's ability to control EVERYTHING the dog wants. This includes access to food, toys, bones, furniture, outside, bed, favored locations, human interaction, as well as when and under what circumstances he may obtain these things. It sounds simple enough, but there is much more to this concept.

We have established that dominance is determined by the behavior of the subordinates, not by the behavior of the one who thinks he is dominant. It is about voluntary compliance or deference to the leader. When we look at a group of dogs, it is easy to pick out the dog who has more clout. He is treated like a rock star or a dignitary by the other dogs. Other dogs defer, appease, and seek affiliation with the dominant dog. It is also easy to pick out the dog who is a bully. He is the one running around threatening and bossing the other dogs causing them to avoid him altogether. Dominant dogs tend to be confident, have an authoritative attitude, and provide appropriate social consequences. Bully dogs tend to be insecure. They have an authoritarian attitude, are socially incompetent, frustrated, and/or angry.

Unfortunately, people often think the more aggressive dog is the leader. As was established in the previous sections, leadership must be achieved through respect not fear. True leaders don't concern themselves with micromanagement. They don't run around trying to control everything and everyone. True leader-type dogs may be slightly aloof at times and do not seek approval from other dogs. Leaders can be great caregivers to their subordinates. They are generally quite concerned and protective of those with which they have a bond...just like a parent. Good leaders provide consistency, are predictable in their behavior, caring, and protective. A good leader actually leads others. He doesn't just bark orders and punish bad behavior.

So what does this mean with regard to training your dog? You should not allow your dog to have access to anything he wants whenever he wants. With this age of convenience and "latch key" dogs, we have dogs that are free fed, have a dog door, have all the toys they could ever want, and live as a human with full access to furniture, etc. They don't have to do anything to get EVERYTHING. Humans have surrendered their leadership role in exchange for convenience. There needs to be a balance. Families must create some boundaries and some behavioral rules for dogs to follow. It is so critical that dogs have a defined role in the family with the humans having more control than the dog. If you are going to allow your dog access to the furniture, consider teaching him following rule: "If my butt is on it, yours is not, unless I invite you." Even if your dog has free access to a dog door, you can still require your dog to wait for your permission to go out the front door when going for a walk. There are many "control" games you can play with your dog. For example, your dog should learn to comply with a trained sit or down before the ball or toy is thrown for a game of fetch. You can also

teach your dog a "stay" or "stop" command that means freeze/stop everything. These types of games stimulate a dog's brain, teach impulse control, build confidence, encourage good manners, and reinforce the human's leadership role.

Leadership needs to be practiced by everyone in the family including children. The leader is not just the person with the deepest, loudest voice or the most clout. When humans lead by controlling resources, it works for everyone! Even a child can require a sit before giving a treat, or before throwing a toy. Between humans and the dog it doesn't matter who gets the resource first, it matters that the leader controls when the dog gets it and what the dog must do in order to get it. For example, you don't have to go out the door first. You just need your dog to wait for your "okay" to go out the door. It is really about permission. The same goes for feeding time. It isn't necessary for the person to eat first, it is important that the dog wait for permission from the person before they eat.

Leadership involves voluntary compliance so don't make your dog comply. Instead, teach him what happens if he doesn't comply...he doesn't get whatever he wants. For example, if he doesn't sit when you tell him to sit, he can't come up on the furniture, or he can't go through the door, or the toy won't be thrown, etc. Basically, you are manipulating his behavior. He needs to experience the disappointment of what happens if he doesn't comply. This concept flies in the face of traditional training where you must make your dog comply with a command.

With traditional training, if you ask your dog to sit and he doesn't, it is followed by pushing down on his rump to make him sit. But in doing this your dog didn't really comply. You just forced him into compliance. Another inappropriate technique is to "nag" your dog by repeating the command as many times as is necessary until your dog finally complies. But in doing this he doesn't ever learn what happens if he doesn't comply with your command. Disappointment is a huge motivator! Dogs need to learn what happens if they do comply and what happens if they don't.

Dominance is about a relationship between individual animals that is established by the outcome of conflict in order to determine who has priority access to resources such as food, preferred resting spots, toys, etc. This relationship is established over a period of time such that one individual consistently defers to the other. This means that owners must be consistent in their training. It is about establishing a sustainable relationship where the roles are clearly determined and consistently maintained. Unfortunately, most owners are diligent about training at first and then it quickly falls by the wayside. It is as if dogs are learning commands as tricks to demonstrate for friends. Controlling your dog's resources and ensuring your dog's compliance with commands must be a part of your daily routine with your dog. This must be incorporated into your relationship.

It is time to rethink the entire concept of dominance and leadership in dog training. Being a leader is not just about providing consequences for bad behavior. Too often families employ punitive techniques such as correcting a dog by pinning, rolling, poking, and/or smacking, etc. These are often ineffective and inappropriate techniques that cause fear and confusion which degrades the trust bond your dog has with you. Leadership is about proactively controlling access to resources so your dog has to look to you for guidance. It is time to utilize the power of disappointment as a primary form of punishment. The time has come to abandon the traditional despotic notion of leadership and dominance. You can be a good leader for your dog and still have a gentle, rewarding, nurturing relationship with him.