

# Do We Need To Dominate Dogs?



Illustration by Bill Celandier

## You asked...

Do dog owners need to be "alpha" and dominate their dogs in order to have control and make the dogs obey?

## The expert says...

With the increasing popularity of dog training television reality shows, the "dominance theory" has resurged. This old and outdated explanation proposed that everything a dog did stemmed from dominance issues; when dogs did not do what was asked of them, they were labeled as dominant, bad dogs that lacked the desire to please and had owners who did not fulfill the "alpha" role.

### MORE MYTH THAN FACT

One basis for this idea was old research on captive wolves and observations of their social interactions, which others extrapolated to companion dogs. Recent research on wild wolf behavior clearly indicates that the long-standing theory of the alpha wolf exerting dominance through aggression and relentless control is more myth than fact.

New research describes the role of wolf leaders as parental in nature. They lead, teach, and care for their pack members rather than control a competitive hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> When mature, the offspring do not compete to overthrow the pack leader; instead, they leave the pack, find a mate, and start a family of their own. If those old theories do not apply to wolves, why should we consider them to be true of dogs, especially in light of other findings that show how dogs themselves have changed because of domestication?<sup>2</sup>

CONTINUES

## MISUNDERSTOOD COMMUNICATION



The complex interspecies relationship between a companion dog and its human family involves a variety of motivations and influences, including genetics, socialization, available resources, fear, conflicts, learning, behavioral pathology, and disease.

Communication is hindered when the meaning and intent behind each species' communication methods are misunderstood. Most dogs that are engaged in unwanted or undesirable behaviors are anxious and fearful.

For example, consider a dog that has stolen an object and is hiding under the bed, growling and snarling at the owner. The dog is indicating that it is afraid (hiding) and wants to avoid confrontation (threat behavior); still, many owners will force the dog out from under the bed and, in the process, may be injured. In this situation, the owner focuses on attempts to retrieve the item and is unaware of the messages contained in the dog's behavior.

### WHAT A DOG IS SAYING

Most owners are simply uneducated about how their pets communicate with them and how to best communicate to their pets. Simple canine messages, which often indicate what the pet may do, are missed many times because they are subtle and fleeting.

Say, for example, that a person approaches a dog that averts its eyes and lowers and turns its head to the side. In dog language, this can indicate an unwillingness to interact; the person, however, may still reach out to touch the dog, and the dog snaps. Dogs can also exhibit anxiety—examples include excessive panting, lip licking, keeping the ears back and tight to the head, and furrowing the brow. A dog might show these signs even when it seems to be approaching a person for attention.

If we continue to look at the dominance model to explain unwanted behaviors in our companion dogs, there is no place for other possible explanations, such as the following:

- When dogs perform an unwanted behavior, it is often because they thought it was the appropriate behavioral choice at the time.
- Unless taught a new response, dogs are unlikely to pick a different one. Dogs do not obey if they do not understand what they are being asked to do.
- When dogs do not listen to a command, a competing emotion or stimulus (good or bad) may be stronger than their desire to perform the requested task.
- Dogs may not have been properly trained to respond correctly in all situations.
- Owners may not have been taught the proper techniques to communicate with their dog.

When punishment is applied in these situations, everyone loses—the dog, the owner, and the veterinarian—because the human–animal bond is damaged. In fact, recent studies have shown that punishment used in training (physical reprimands, alpha rolls, lip pinches, choke collars) increases the likelihood of an aggressive response.<sup>3</sup> In addition, punishment creates stress, anxiety, and fear.

### THE VETERINARIAN'S ROLE

One of our many jobs as veterinarians is to protect the welfare of companion animals and prevent unnecessary anxiety, stress, or abuse for any reason, including training. Dogs are not out to conquer the world, and most pet owners do not understand how dogs learn, communicate, or perceive their environment. Therefore, we must help both the dogs and owners understand how to interact in a more productive and positive manner. Positive training methods that focus on teaching what is desired rather than punishing what is unwanted not only are easier for inexperienced handlers to use but are less likely to result in anxiety and uncertainty.

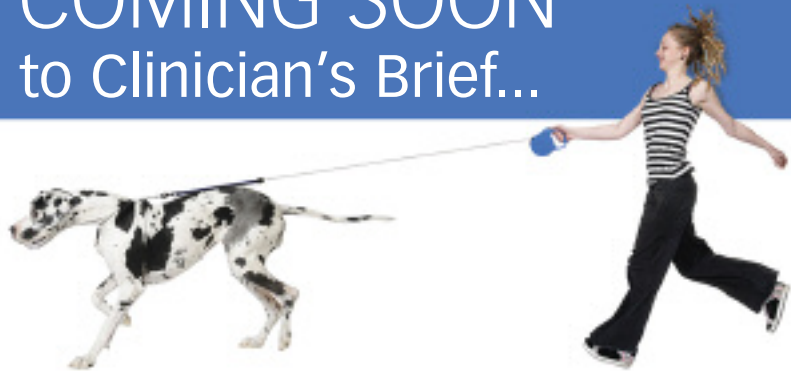
#### Determining Family Needs

Veterinarians can help by assessing how owners would like their pets to behave (and identifying problem behaviors); then advising them on training regimens or resources to help them achieve their goals. Each family has different needs—

#### DISCUSS IT

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some may want a dog that does not run out the door; such families need to work on “sit and stay” in the vicinity of the front door. Another family may wish to walk their dog nicely down the street; that family might benefit from head collars or a no-pull harness.

### Respecting the Dog's Limitations

Dog owners need to learn how to assimilate their dog into their life in a manner that works for them while respecting the needs and limitations of the dog. It is useful to remember and help others realize that just like people, dogs have limits. Not all dogs need or want to be everywhere—some dogs do not want to go to dog parks, soccer games, and pet stores. Because dogs are sentient beings, they vary in their tolerance of handling and certain situations.

### Watch, Listen, & Assess

We need to help pet owners understand how dogs see the world; dogs like consistent and predictable interactions, and they want to know what they should do and what the outcome will be. Dogs will use body postures and facial expressions to indicate what they will do. They watch what we do more than they listen to what we say; humans tend to do the opposite. People often move quickly without pausing to assess how the dog is responding to what they are doing. By watching and assessing the pet's responses, humans can alter the situation and help the dog understand what to do.

### Empathy Is Key

We must guide owners on how to integrate dogs into their lives using humane methods (head collars, reward training) and by understanding that unwanted behavior is not about defiance but lack of learning or underlying fear or anxiety. We should encourage pet owners to set limits, be consistent and predictable, and provide for their dogs' daily needs for attention, social interaction, exercise, play, and quiet time. Helping owners understand how to provide the best welfare for their pets is a win-win situation: good for the dogs and their families and good for the veterinary profession.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references and suggested reading.