

Dominance Aggression

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Dogs are like pack animals, much like wolves. The dog perceives the human members of it's family as members of it's pack. Dominance in the pack is linear, which means that there can be only one leader, and that no two dogs share the same level of dominance. Dogs don't expect equality, but it is natural for them to push toward the highest social position, that of the "alpha" or top dog.

Dominant dogs are those with the strongest inherited drive to push for the alpha dog position in the family or social group. This type of dog interprets kind owners as weak, and takes advantage of them to move toward the alpha position. Once it has achieved the dominant position in the family, the dominant dog expects it's owners to respect it's wishes, follow it's direction, and not to compete for resources.

In nature, two rivals for the alpha position fight for dominance, and the winner becomes dominant. The loser either assumes a lower status in the pack, or leaves. Humans however, try to win the dog's affection by petting, spoiling, and allowing the dog to get it's own way, all of which further stimulate dominance.

IMPORTANT FACTS CONCERNING DOMINANCE

Dominance aggression expressed to people is directed toward family members, or people the dog is familiar with (members of it's pack). Normally, aggression is expressed to people the dog perceives as threatening its social position (by hugging, petting on top of the head, standing over, or direct eye contact). The events may range from a growl to a bite, and occur when there is a conflict over a resource (food, toys, bed), when the dog doesn't get it's own way, or when the dog is protecting a group member or object. Very small children are rarely attacked.

The attacks of a dominant dog seem unprovoked, fast and often without threat (the dog doesn't growl before biting). The dog often has a glazed look to the eye before and during the attack, and immediately after seems contrite, remorseful or unaware of exactly what happened.

Dominance appears to be inherited, (overwhelming number of cases are purebred dogs) and most are males). Castration has no effect on reducing dominance, but it is recommended to prevent transmission of this genetic defect to future generations.

Dominance is complicated because it may change relative to time, place and circumstance. However, it is consistent within each specific situation. Dominant dogs usually show one to two signs of dominance; they may resent a hand over the head; they may protect food or toys; or they may resist grooming, nail trimming, or discipline.

Dominance is not fully expressed until 2-3 years of age. Once it is established, it is relatively permanent (dog to dog and dog to owner). Once the people in the family establish

their dominance over the dog, problems related to dominance are usually solved.

TREATING DOMINANCE PROBLEMS

The dog must learn that nothing in life is free. He must learn that you control all valued factors and that he must earn food, attention, touch, exercise and freedom. Consistent training is essential. The most dominant person in the family (the one that the dog is least likely to growl or bite) should dominate the dog first, and then the training should be generalized to all members of the family, including the children.

1. TRAIN the dog to sit, stay, come, down, down-stay and heel in that order. The 20 minute down-stay, without the trainer present, is the most important to accomplish. If the dog will not go down, put a foot on the leash next to the dog's head and hold down. Say "down" and give a small food reward within ½ a second of the command. Then use the command "stay" with a food reward. Reward every few seconds with food for staying down. Gradually increase the time between the food rewards. This will help the dog realize that it can please you and be rewarded for good behaviour. Try to involve everyone in the family. While you stand on the leash, even small children can give the command, immediately followed by the food reward. While you may need the help of a professional trainer, it is better to train the dog yourself than to send it away.

The value of this training is to gain COMMAND CONTROL over the dog and to establish a leader-follower relationship between owner and dog which is essential for long term success. This training must be maintained for the life of the dog.

2. AVOID ANY CONFRONTATION which the dog might win. If you lose one confrontation a month, you will lose the benefit of all the training you have done. **Do not discipline the dog.** If the dog is performing some unwanted behaviour, divert the dog's attention by telling it to come and sit or go to it's bed, and reward the dog for following your command.

3. REMOVE ALL VALUED ASSETS (toys, bones, etc). You do not want the dog to have anything it may want to protect from you. Many dominant dogs growl if you walk by them while they are chewing a toy. You can easily prevent this by removing all of the dog's valued possessions. This also shows the dog that you control his toys.

4. NO GAMES. Dogs win all of the games that they play, because the game only goes on as long as the dog wants to play. Wining a game increases a dog's dominance. It is therefore important to avoid all games - chase, throw-the-ball, tug-of-war, wrestling, etc. Although you may, in the future, be able to play retrieving games with your dog, you should never play rough games with a dog that tends to be dominant.

5. FEED THE DOG ONLY WHEN HE RESPONDS TO A COMMAND. The dog must realize that you provide all the necessities of life, including food. Make the dog sit or lie down before giving him his meal. If you feed your dog free-choice, start giving him meals at specified times so he realizes that you control his food.

6. DO NOT TOUCH THE DOG FOR SEVERAL WEEKS. Touch is an extremely potent reward for a dog, so this is especially important and must include every one that the dog

associates with. If the dog jumps up, rests against you, or demands petting, you must totally ignore him, move away, or tell the dog to go to his bed. Another alternative is to put him in a sit-stay in some other part of the room.

7. DO NOT ALLOW THE DOG TO SLEEP ON BEDS OR OTHER FURNITURE.

If the dog is on the furniture and you wish to get him off, call him to you and tell him to sit. Then you can reward him for sitting.

8. EXERCISE THE DOG, ON A LEASH, FOR 15 MINUTES EVERY DAY. While teaching the dog that you are dominant, his freedom should be restricted. He should always be exercised on the leash.

9. It may be necessary to add specific conditioning techniques for each problem. The veterinarian can give you other instructions for dealing with the specific problems that you have with your dog.

10. Place a **PROMISE HALTER** on the dog during the days with a 3 foot lead attached when you are at home.

11. In severe cases, or those in which the family may be at risk, it may be necessary to **CAGE CONFIN**E the dog for four weeks. This method is also more appropriate for large breed dogs. The dog is placed in a cage, in an area of high household activity for two weeks. Everyone ignores the dog during this time. The family does not speak to the dog or go near the cage except to give the dog food and water in the cage. The dog is exercised briefly on leash and is not allowed any freedom. The second two weeks are exactly the same except the dog is brought out of the cage and is trained 10 minutes twice daily. The training consists of simple commands such as come, sit, stay and go to bed.

The purpose of this training is to gain command control and to establish an appropriate leader-follower relationship between dog and owner. This is a powerful and safe method of establishing dominance over the dog because the dog perceives that it has lost control of its environment.