

CANINE DOMINANCE - PREVENTION AND CORRECTION

By John T. Fowler

Counselling clients in prevention and correction of dominance aggression is a valuable service that helps owners and strengthens the human/animal relationship. To understand the problem, we need to understand pack hierarchy and the relationship between animals.

Dominance among dogs is determined by such things as size, weight, sex, hormonal status and previous experience. Dominant expressions are things that an animal does to show that it has a dominant personality. These include maintained eye contact, ears erect and forward, vertical retraction of lips to expose teeth, head held high to increase height, tail horizontal and tense, and rigid posture. Dominant signalling includes standing over another member of the pack, placing head or paws over another's back, body slamming, grabbing the muzzle or neck, pushing or bowling over, and mounting.

Submissive expressions (just as important in maintaining the pack hierarchy), include avoidance of eye contact, horizontal retraction of lips decreasing exposure of teeth, lowered tail, flattened ears, crouched body position and submissive urination. There is active and passive submission. Active submission is a greeting where one approaches another, lowering head and body with rapid wagging of the tail. Passive submission is a response to threat and dominant gestures and can use all of the submissive expressions.

Dominance aggression is basically an attitude problem. There is no agreed criteria to classify dominance aggression. Studies show wide variation in the rate of canine aggression problems, likely because of different ways researchers classify behaviour problems, with some practitioners feeling that it makes up close to 50% of cases.

Typical Profile

The behaviour profile typically provided by owners describes the animals as stubborn, hard-headed, aloof and independent, often aggressive towards family members (viewed as lower members of the pack), and some are aggressive toward visitors. Many do well with obedience training.

Where the owner/handler is in charge in the relationship with the dog, the animal usually won't challenge, and there will be no problem. Nor is there often a problem where an owner is submissive. Most problems occur where the owners personality is in between. Characteristic behaviour includes animals that are irritable when disturbed, typically possessive or competitive over desired objects or food, exhibit dominance signalling towards humans and tend to resist dominant signalling that may be exhibited by the owner.

Things likely to elicit aggressive behaviour include disciplining, staring at the dog (a hazard for children who tend to approach animals directly and maintain eye contact), as well as hugging, touching or petting which can be interpreted as dominant gestures. Dominance aggressive attacks are often described by the owner as very sudden, seemingly unprovoked, accompanied by a stare or 'glazed' look and action by the dog after the attack that appears

apologetic and an attempt to 'make up' to the owner for the attack. It is thought that this is a learned behaviour from other situations where the owner seemed upset, the dog approached and was rewarded.

Goals of Treatment

In the beginning treatment, the goals should first be to ensure no one gets hurt, then reverse the dominant hierarchy. This is best achieved by first stopping then, through counter-conditioning, switching dominant displays. In each situation where the dog has displayed dominantly or aggressively it is taught to respond passively and in a friendly way.

In many cases environmental intervention, such as keeping the dog away from females in heat, is effective. Surgery will usually help in some cases, but cannot be depended upon. Behaviour modification will be needed.

Owners must be aware that there is no guarantee of success – no guarantee that the dog will never bite again. They must also understand that they are responsible for the behaviour of their dogs. Some cases are very difficult (such as a big aggressive dog living with a small passive person). Then the best solution can be simply to change the owner.

Behaviour Modification

If a dog is territorial aggressive as well as dominance aggressive, it is necessary to work on both issues simultaneously. Treat territorial aggression with control of access to territory. For example, if a dog charges the door or living room window when the mail man places the mail in the slot, simply restricting the animals access to the door or living room can be a big help.

In modifying behaviour, a first step is reducing stimuli. Anything that causes aggression, such as reaching for the dog, taking its collar, grooming, chasing it from the sofa should be avoided. It is necessary to stop the animal from showing aggression daily. Every time that the dog is aggressive (especially if it backs the owner down), the problem gets worse.

Establish Leadership

Most important is establishing leadership. The dog must learn the owner is in control of all important things in life, nothing is free. Anything that the dog gets from the owner must be earned. If the dog has been obedience trained, the owner must review the training – if not, the use of food lures to reward obedient actions is recommended. Before the dog gets anything it wants: food, a walk, attention from the owner, it has to do something to defer the owner. The dog should never be allowed to give orders. If the dog is in the habit of nudging the owner for attention, the owner must learn to ignore the animal for a few seconds or minutes, then give it attention when it does something for the owner.

One way to condition the dog is to accept dominant stimuli and to use a Gentle Leader halter and do roll-overs with the dog, or prone positions where the owner grabs the dog by the scruff and hold it down on it's side. Where a dog is aggressive in a certain location such as a doorway, it can be conditioned to a submissive response for a treat.

Prognosis

Prognosis is something of a subjective judgement. Factors include intensity of the aggression, how long it has been going on, how able the owner is to understand that euthanasia is a possibility – a strong possibility with a dangerous dog that might be large, or has delivered serious or frequent bites.

An Ounce of Prevention

Prevention is probably more important than treatment. We must learn to recognize early signs of dominance. While puppy temperament testing is probably not reliable in giving information about adult behaviours, it may give information on how to train and socialize the dog.

What is really important is that owners establish leadership at an early age. Helpful techniques include keeping the puppy on a regular feeding schedule, making it sit before food (so that it understands that the owner is in control of something very important in life), handling exercises, early obedience training (at 8 or 9 weeks), dominant/submissive signalling and handling with reward for showing submissive signals.

Above all, consistency in training is important. There must be rules, and the family must follow them at all times.