

Both Ends of the Leash

Action/Reaction The temptations of the dominance fallacy

Patricia B. McConnell

Here are some “rules” for you dog lovers out there (that is, if you’re given to following just anyone’s advice, whether or not they’re qualified to give it):

- Don’t pet your dog unless he works for it first.
- Don’t let your dog move his head so that it is higher than your own.
- Don’t feed your dog until after you’ve eaten.
- Don’t step around your dog if she’s in your path; make her get up and move, even if she’s sound asleep.
- Don’t let your dog sleep with you or cuddle with you on the couch.
- Don’t clean up after your dog while she’s watching you.

But, never fear. Here’s what you can do:

- Spit in your dog’s food.
- Wipe your baby’s dirty diapers on the wall.

Why, you might ask? Because each action is said to either cause your dog to think he’s dominant over you, or – in the case of the spitting and the wiping – tells your dog that you (and your baby) are dominant over her. Seriously. There are people out there telling us that these tips are critical to our own happiness as well as that of our dogs.

Oh my. Are we really still having this conversation? Are we really still talking about whether or not we need to “get dominance” over our dogs? Ten years ago, I wrote a column for Bark titled “Alpha Schmalpha,” in which I explained that dominance is one of the most misused and misunderstood words in the English language, at least in relation to dog training. As I and many other trainers and behaviorists repeat endlessly in books, blogs and seminars, dominance is simply a description of a relationship between two individuals who want the same thing.



One animal is said to be “dominant” over the other if he or she always has primary access to the pork chop that falls on the floor, or the favorite toy, or the cozy lap of a dozing guardian. Thus, it’s about the resolution of situations in which there might be competition for a resource. It is not about coming when called, or sitting when told to sit, or accepting unfamiliar dogs into the yard.

We’re not even sure how the concept relates to interactions between dogs, much less to interactions between two entirely different species like people and dogs. At present, thoughtful ethologists and behaviorists are re-evaluating the concepts of “dominance” and “social status” as they relate to the domestic dog. Although there are questions and quibbles about some of the finer points, experts almost universally agree that the concept of “getting dominance” over our dogs is, at best, not useful, and more often is harmful to our relationships with our best friends.

Yet, the idea that we must “dominate” our dogs lives on, zombie-like, in spite of years of research and experience that demonstrates “being dominant” over our dogs does not improve obedience. In fact, we know that using positive reinforcement results in the best behavior, the fewest behavioral problems and the richest relationships. Given that, the question we need to ask ourselves is this: why is the concept of achieving dominance over our dogs so seductive? Why is it so hard for people to give up?

This is most likely not a question with one answer. Given that humans are complex animals, I suspect there are many answers. And, of course, all we can do is speculate. Perhaps thinking about what might

motivate us to hang onto this age-old concept can help us finally give it a respectful burial.

Surely one reason that so many people are enamored of the concept is that social status is highly relevant to our species. No matter how egalitarian we are, the fact is that in restaurants, some people get better tables than others, and most of us can't walk into the governor's office just to have a chat. We address physicians as "Dr. Johnson" but we call nurses "Anita" or "James"; we ask the judge for "permission to approach the bench"; and if we are lucky enough to be given an audience at Buckingham Palace, we still, still, bow or curtsy to the queen.

However, we don't seem to make the mistake within our own species that we make with our dogs, confounding social status or control with teaching or conveying information. We may take away our children's cell phones to make them spend more time studying algebra, but we don't think that our ability to do so actually teaches them algebra. And yet, we tend to do that with our dogs all the time. Dogs are supposed to come when called, refrain from jumping up on company and walk at perfect heel just because we tell them to. Each of those actions requires learning; they are not natural to dogs and have to be taught, much the same as we had to be taught how to solve an equation like $2x - 3 = 5$.

Perhaps another reason we are so susceptible to the fallacy of "getting dominance" over our dogs is that it makes dog training seem simple. One-step shopping – just get your dog to accept you as "alpha," and voilà! Your dog will stop jumping up on visitors and will quietly walk through the neighborhood at your side, ignoring all the interesting stuff, like squirrels and information left by other dogs as they passed by.

No training required, either for your dog or, as importantly, for you. No need to learn timing and reinforcement schedules and how to know when your dog can learn and when she is too tired or distracted to understand what you are trying to teach her. In a world of instant rice and instant messaging and instant information on demand, no wonder a simple, black-and-white concept is attractive.

No matter that dominance has no relation to these issues, or that the way it is presented often equates more to bullying than to social status. Sure, it's

appealing to think that one overriding concept will take care of a host of behavioral issues. And hey, how hard could it be to talk your dog into believing that you are the alpha? You're the one who can open the door, you're the one who brings home the dog food and you're the one with the opposable thumbs and the big brain. Of course, opening doors has nothing to do with sitting when the doorbell rings, but surely being "dominant" will mean that when you say "Sit!" she does. What else would she do?

Well, actually, there are many reasonable responses that a dog can make to a noise coming out of a person's mouth, such as: have no idea what sit means because she hasn't been taught to understand what she was supposed to do when she heard the word; or be unable, without training and practice, to control her emotions and sit down when she is overwhelmed with excitement.

Finally, and perhaps most compellingly, the concept of dominance feeds into our desire for control. Let's face it: we all want control, at least over some things. Influencing the behavior of others is crucial to members of a social species, and is most likely one of the driving forces behind language, facial expressions of emotion and the importance that movie directors pay to the musical score. Heaven knows our desire for control is satisfied rarely enough: world leaders pay no attention to our solutions to one crisis after another – granted, we've only been talking to our friends about them, but then that's my point. We are awash in events that we read about, hear about and post blogs about but have little or no control over. How satisfying then to say "Sit" and have our dogs hear us, do it and look up with a grin.

The idea that all we need is respect (cue Aretha here) and our dog will behave perfectly is understandably seductive. Too bad it's incorrect. Far worse, it can lead, at best, to a dog who performs because he is intimidated, and at worst, to a dog who is abused.

The fact is, dogs will respect us only if we are consistent, clear and fair. They will love and trust us only if we are loving and patient and are able to communicate to them in ways that they understand. That does not mean we need to "spoil" them and allow them to behave like rude and demanding house guests. However, we need to teach them how to behave in the society of another species, rather than expecting them to do what you say just because they

“want to please us.” That foolish fantasy is as realistic as a Disney cartoon.

Ah, we all love a good fantasy, don't we? However, separating fantasy from reality is an important part of being a grown-up. Let's make it an important part of being a good guardian for our dogs.

I'd write more, but I have to go spit in my dog's dinner.

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