

Both Ends of the Leash

Alpha Schmalpha?

Patricia B. McConnell

Not long ago, whilst innocently reading dog food labels at a pet store, I heard a woman carefully explain to her friend that dogs are only happy if you are dominant over them. She went on to elaborate that the way to achieve dominance is to throw a dog onto his back and scream in his face – “just like wolves do,” she said. I would like to see her try that in a pen of wolves – no, actually I wouldn't, come to think of it. I don't believe in capital punishment for giving bad advice. And oh, how advice abounds in the world of dog training. Surely it's second only to the tidal wave of unsolicited advice that swells over the parents of newborns. Most people seem to believe that growing up with a dog next door qualifies them to advise the rest of us about any number of dog-related issues, whether trivial or serious, regarding a dog they've never met.

It's bad enough to be surrounded by conflicting advice from well-meaning friends, but it's another thing altogether when the advice coming from professionals is contradictory. Right now the continuum of advice from dog trainers is as wide as the Atlantic Ocean. One trainer says: “You've got to get tougher on your dog! Dogs only respect the alpha, and that needs to be you!” Another says: “Alpha schmalpha, there's no such thing as a dominance hierarchy in pet dogs. Dogs aren't wolves; they evolved from scavenging village dogs who don't live in packs like wolves, so they don't have any understanding of social hierarchies.” No wonder our heads are spinning. Not so our dogs; they're quietly licking their paws and if I may indulge myself for just a moment, I imagine that they are amused at our confusion. If they could explain themselves to us, perhaps they would say: There are only two things that you need to know about how to incorporate an understanding of social hierarchy into dog training – first, it's really simple, and second, it's really complicated.



Feel better? Actually, those two statements aren't as contradictory as they seem. Here's another way to put it: Social hierarchies aren't simplistic linear pecking orders, and it's important not to over-simplify them. But the truth is that lots of dog trainers and dog lovers alike have over-simplified the structure of social relationships among dogs, and it's done our dogs no good. Advice about “getting dominance over your dog” has been thrown around like rice at a wedding, without an understanding of what dominance really is.

Most of what we've assumed about the social behavior of our own dogs has been extrapolated from wolf behavior, and these studies have taught us much about the dogs that we live with. Like wolves (who are, after all, the same species as dogs and can interbreed freely with them), our dogs tend to be territorial and to greet each other in ritualized displays in which visual signals communicate social rank. A submissive grin means the same thing in a dog as it does in a wolf. But extrapolations from wolves to dogs aren't always accurate, given that dogs don't share all of their behavior with wolves. Add on some amazingly inaccurate descriptions of wolf behavior, and you end up with some truly horrific advice about how to treat your dog. For example, owners are advised by some to “do what wolves do and use alpha roll-overs”: grab their dogs by the scruff, throw them over on their backs and scream in their faces. But wolves don't do “alpha roll-overs” – during times of social tension, individual wolves place themselves on their back in a posture called “passive submission.” Throwing a dog over on his back and yelling in his face is not “natural” behavior in a dog's or a wolf's social

repertoire, it's acting like a lunatic. No wonder so many dogs have bitten their owners when they were subjected to "alpha roll-overs." What would you do if you lived in a house where you never knew when someone was going to attack you? Just like children in abusive homes, as dogs grow up they begin to fight back, and the number of dogs that I've seen who were evaluated as "vicious" for simply defending themselves would break your heart.

So many people have equated the word dominance with harsh training techniques and violence towards dogs that many of us are conditioned to wince when we hear it. The term is so problematic that at one conference, Wayne Hunthausen (a veterinary behaviorist) and I began jokingly referring to it as "the concept formerly referred to as dominance," complete with its own Prince-like icon. Dominance is such a dirty word that even talking about concepts related to it, like social status, risks the equivalent of an electronic collar correction from some trainers and behaviorists. But you can't watch two dogs greet each other and ignore the obvious fact that social status is important to dogs – any more than you'd skip up to the President of the United States and ask him for the time. Surely we can avoid using violence on our dogs without pretending that social status is irrelevant to dogs and our relationship with them. After all, all dogs may be equal, but surely some dogs are more equal than others.

A good way to start sorting out any issue that seems muddled and complicated is to step back a bit and look at the big picture. Luckily, although our understanding of the social behavior of dogs is amazingly thin, ethologists know a tremendous amount about how hundreds of species of animals manage their social interactions. That knowledge can help us put our relationships with our dogs in perspective. Here are some things that we know from tens of thousands of hours of observations on animals that live in groups, from coyotes to chimpanzees: First of all, we know that dominance and aggression are completely different things. Dominance is simply a position in the social hierarchy, a description of the relationship between two or more individuals where one individual has more social freedom than the other. This is a familiar concept to humans, being a highly hierarchical species ourselves. You may think of yourself as being egalitarian, yet if the governor dropped by your

house while you were reading this column, you'd probably open the door – but try striding into the Governor's mansion just because you decided you'd like to have a chat.

However having a social hierarchy doesn't necessitate violence. Of course, violence is one way that an individual can get power, but it's only one way and not a very good one at that. If an individual achieves high social status through aggression, then that status can only be maintained by vigilance and force. Besides, fighting is dangerous, especially for predators like dogs with the equivalent of carpet knives in their mouths, so nature has created another way. Social hierarchies, where each individual has an understanding of his or her place in the society, are designed to avoid violence, not to encourage it. There are many peaceful ways to become a leader in any species, from elections (in ours) to family relationships and coalitions (in others).

How an individual achieves and maintains high status is as much a quality of her own personality as anything else. From humans to chimpanzees to wolves to sheep, some individuals can take charge of a group merely by their presence – exuding that hard-to-describe sense of calm confidence that we all are attracted to. I find it fascinating how universal the reaction to "leadership qualities" is, and that these qualities seem to be relevant across species boundaries. Every sheepdog handler is looking for that special dog who, by virtue of nothing more than her physical presence, can convince the sheep to let her take over. It's the less confident dogs who have to use their mouths and nip at the sheep, and it's the truly panicked ones who bite and hang on, eyes screwed shut, jaws clamped on a mouthful of wool. "Alphawannabes" I call them, whether dog or human, the personality type that you least want to be your boss, because their insecurity tends to cause them to use force and violence, even when it's unnecessary. Pity the poor dogs whose owners are alphawannabes. Their dogs can't quit and find another job.

But there's another over-simplification that can also cause dogs distress. This one is from the other end of the continuum from the "get dominance over your dog" philosophy, and it comes from owners who can't bear to deny their dogs anything. Want a massage? Want a cookie? Want to never, ever be left out of

anything? It's called spoiling, and although lots of us joke that we "spoil" our dogs because we feed them 100 percent natural organic food and buy them color-coordinated dog beds, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about owners who suffer at the thought that their dog would be denied anything. I see them in my office on occasion, and their dogs have literally never learned to tolerate even the slightest frustration. Regrettably, life has a tendency to mess up our plans, so every one of these dogs ends up being frustrated. One minute they can't play with the dog outside because the window is in the way, or they can't get the toy out from under the couch or their owner pulls them away from the door by the collar. When that happens, some of these dogs have a temper tantrum, never having learned to cope with disappointment. It's one thing to see a young puppy throw a tantrum, but it's downright chilling coming from an eighty-pound adult dog with teeth that can slice open leather.

Some of these dogs are nervous, pacing non-stop in my office until their owners quit catering to them and start taking care of them. The truth of the matter is, some dogs, just like some people, find the world a scary place, and look to their owners for leadership. Leadership is a dirty word in some circles, and that's too bad, because I think that's exactly what some dogs need. Sadly, perhaps it is easier now for some of us to relate to that need for a benevolent leader, someone who can be counted on to make good, wise decisions and keep us safe. But it's hard to convey a sense of leadership if you can't create any boundaries, and so dogs whose owners cater to them all the time are often nervous dogs, dogs who are calmer and happier where they can count on someone else to make some of the decisions. Alphawannabe types of dogs, the dogs who want a lot of social control but are insecure, seem to be especially problematic when they're given no benevolent boundaries.

So although the issues of social status, dominance and how we should treat our dogs are complicated in one sense, in another way they're really simple. Social status is relevant to dogs and people when they live in organized groups with a limited amount of high-quality resources (that's different than scavenging dogs by the way, but that's another column). Dominance is not the same as social status, and social status is just one small aspect of our relationship with our dogs. It's been over-

emphasized, misrepresented and used to justify all kinds of horrific behavior towards our dogs, and it's gratifying that more and more dog owners are turning away from it. But the other end of the continuum can cause its own set of problems. Dogs may need us to be playmates and friends, but they also need us to be benevolent leaders. That's what good parents are, that's what good teachers are and that's what good dog owners are. I guess it's really simple after all.

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