

Positive Relationship or Alpha Position?

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Today there is a lot of information available in print, on the internet, and on television regarding what you should or should not do when sharing your life with a canine companion. I'm not surprised that people are sometimes confused. How do you choose which advice to follow?

Due to the popularity of recent television shows, the idea of "dominance training" has increased. This approach can have damaging results sometimes leading to bites on humans and inappropriate punishment of our dogs. The time has come to stop accusing our dogs of dominance! Instead let's become educated on species-typical behaviors and viewpoints our dogs possess and focus on how to build our relationship with them rather than break it down.

I am a professional, certified pet dog trainer and also the proud "mom" of three wonderful Siberian Huskies. My dogs and I share a loving relationship that has been built on trust, mutual respect and benevolent consistent leadership. As a certified pet dog trainer, I am dedicated to education, remain current in training advances and research results, have a proficient level of knowledge and strive to uphold a professional standard in the dog-training field.

Modern dog trainers promote the idea of dogs as active members of their families rather than subordinate beings. Training your dog should be fun for the entire family. Using modern methods to train will help build relationships in which children, as well as adults, will be respected as a leader rather than be viewed by Rover as a chew toy. A major downfall to outdated "dominance" based training methods is that they are extremely difficult for adults and more so for children to implement, which can result in miscommunications between dogs and humans.

Contrary to popular belief, dogs are not on a mission to "rule the world" and their actions are not a well thought-out plot to overthrow humankind. Our dogs live simpler mental lives than humans: they live in the present and act based on what works best for them. While dogs likely experience joy, fear and other primitive emotions, some emotions like spite, jealousy and guilt are more complex and may require more mental processing than they are physically equipped to handle. Hence, dogs do not view the world the way humans do.

Building a relationship with your dog takes time and results from clear, concise information both given and received. In reality, when we train our dogs, we are teaching them English as a second language. This requires patience as they learn our language and culture. Comparatively, how do you imagine you would feel if you moved to a foreign country and were expected to live within a community that didn't speak your language and followed different cultural rules? Probably a little confused and lost at first, right? We can, however, help speed the learning process for our dogs, if we know how they best learn and perceive the world.

Our canine friends thrive with clearly defined boundaries. It gives them a sense of security to know what is allowed and what isn't, when he eats, where to sleep, etc. That being said, dogs do not innately know what our human rules are. They are dogs and dogs follow dog rules. They have to be taught what human rules are. How can you help your dog succeed?

Your dog needs a benevolent leader more than he does an "alpha" figure. Benevolence is defined as being kind and helpful. Will the act of being kind to your dog allow him to think that he is in charge of the household? Doubtful. Your dog will certainly respect you more if you show him kindness and offer encouragement rather than punishment for mistakes he/she doesn't comprehend. Personally I would prefer my dog perceives me as someone worthy of trust rather than as someone to fear.

Clearly define your rules. For example, if you do not want your pet on the furniture then teach him from the beginning that furniture is off limits. Offer him a nice stuffed Kong toy on the floor and be consistent in not allowing him up on furniture. Spend time on the floor with him thereby, making the floor a fabulous place for your dog. When you are ready to move to the couch, get up and move with a gentle verbal reminder to

stay “off”. As a tool to help gently guide, a leash can also be used to assist your dog in being successful during the learning process. After all, your dog did not jump up on the couch as a show of authority; he jumped up because it is a soft comfortable place to rest.

Much information is available that fosters the belief that humans must always show the dog who is boss by doing such things as: eating first, walking out doorways first, making the dog move rather than simply walking around him, etc. In my training, I’ve come to know these mindsets as “old school” ways of thinking. Today, there are much more humane methods that work effectively to teach the dog the rules you’ve set while still gaining his respect.

For example, if you were to follow an outdated “dog rule” you would be required to go out the door first *each and every time* you let your dog outside. On warm sunny days, we’d be willing to step outside first but I don’t know many people who will step outside in the pouring rain or a freezing snowstorm before allowing their dog out to potty. The end result is inconsistency in training. A consistent approach of asking your dog to sit politely before you open the door and release him will do much more for your relationship and establishing yourself as a leader than stepping out into the rain before him. In doing so, you are teaching your dog to be polite and respectful not demanding that he submit to you.

Outdated information insists that the dog has no possessions therefore all toys are yours. This old rule further insists that you remove items from the dog’s mouth expecting no problems from the dog. By teaching your dog to “trade” (or “share”) you will gain the ability to reliably remove any item from his mouth while continuing to build a relationship built on trust. A dog may learn to play “keep away” or worse, begin to show guarding behavior if items are continually snatched from his mouth.

What if your dog just wants to love you and be loved back? If you choose the “show them I’m the boss” route of leadership, a dog that leans against your leg or lays his head in your lap would be viewed as a dog who is displaying “dominant behavior” because he wanted to be on/near you. If you love your dog and want to roll on the floor with him, give him a hug and a kiss on the head, or snuggle on your bed please, do so! Yes, a “pushy” dog will come to you and nudge your hand for a pat on the head or paw at your body for attention; this, however, is defined as rude behavior not as a dominance display. This behavior can easily be modified. By ignoring the dog until he settles you will likely lessen the behavior in a very short amount of time.

Rover, who is bouncing with glee, happy tail wagging is not trying to dominate you – he’s simply happy to see you and wants your attention. If your dog likes to jump up to greet you but every time he jumps up your response is to cross your arms and turn away from him he will learn that he does not get your attention (his original motivation) until his feet are on the ground. Kicking or pinning a dog for jumping up is inappropriate, abusive and will teach him that you cannot be trusted.

Humans and dogs can certainly cohabitate peacefully without “dominating” or showing “who is boss”. Imagine how stressful our lives and the lives of our canine companions would be if we always had to compete for status. It’s possible to know your place in a pack without the use of force and, in fact, that’s how it works in nature! Wolves do not “dominate” one another – in the wild, few conflicts ever arise. There is no place for physical reprimands such as pinning or kicking in today’s training methods rather, consistent, benevolent leadership will ensure a harmonious relationship between human and dog.

By rewarding the behaviors you desire with gentle praise or small food treats, and ignoring those behaviors that are undesirable, the dog will alter his behavior naturally and quickly. Dogs do what works! Dogs are dogs and they will behave according to their own species’ rules – it is what they are hardwired to do. Take the time to humanely train your dogs to what the rules of your house are before labeling them as “dominant”. Treat your dog with respect! You will, in turn, receive respect from your dog.

Please visit the links below provided by the **Association of Pet Dog Trainers** for more information.

<http://www.apdt.com/petowners/choose/dominancemyths.aspx>

<http://www.apdt.com/petowners/choose/dominance.aspx>

<http://www.apdt.com/veterinary/journals/dominance.asp>

Also visit Dr. Ian Dunbar’s fabulous site at: <http://www.dogstardaily.com>