Changing Attitudes About Dominance in Domestic Dogs (Canis lupus familiaris)

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An Outdated Model

Dominance-Based Dog Training

Many concepts of dominance, and alpha position currently popular among pet professionals is based on older scientific research on wolf and dog behavior that has been brought into question since published or is based on misinterpretations of scientific results (Bradshaw et al., 2009, Hetts DVD, Van Kerkhove, 2004).

Dominance-based dog training assumes wolves and domestic dogs are socially organized in which the highest ranking individual or pair, referred to as the alpha(s), have primary access to all resources at all times. The beta individual(s) are the second in line, and so on. Domestic-based dog training further assumes individuals will aggressively compete for the highest rank possible (Drews et al, 2000). It concludes, therefore, that pet dog owners should view their households as a pack with a linear hierarchy and should take steps to be the alpha(s) (source).

Common Myths and Misconceptions

Misinformed assumptions have lead to beliefs that dominance is a personality trait in some dogs and that dogs higher-ranked than owners, will develop unwanted behavior (source). For example...

- Mouthing or nipping during play
- Leaning against person or jumping up on person
- Not responding to commands
- Destruction and stealing objects
- Mounting (aka humping)
- Destruction and stealing objects
- Upgrade (aka dating favors)
- Aggressive toward a variety of individuals in a variety of situations

Inappropriate Dog Training Techniques

Physical force and threats by humans toward dogs as a means of establishing dominance has been recommended as daily exercises and/or as punishment for unwanted behaviors (VAWS, 2008, Hetts DVD).

The “alpha roll” falsely claims to initiate behavior between a dominant subordinate pair of wolves and is dangerous to both dog and human (VAWS, Bradshaw et al., 2009, Hetts DVD). An “alpha roll” usually includes one or more of the following: (A) turning a dog onto it’s side or back (B) holding or shaking the scruff, neck or face (C) holding or putting pressure on the muzzle (D) pulling a dog off the ground by it’s collar (E) close, direct eye contact, pinning, looking over dog

Less dangerous but no more effective in preventing unwanted behavior is a list of “Don’t” rules (VAWS, Hetts, DVD).

- Don’t spoil dog/treat like human child
- Don’t allow dog to win at tug-of-war
- Don’t allow dog through doors first
- Don’t allow dog to win at tug-of-war
- Don’t allow dog to eat first

Feral Dog Behavior

Feral dogs show less sophisticated social organization compared to wild wolves (Bradshaw et al., 2004). In urban areas, feral dogs showed aggressive associations in which a few dogs scavenge together for a short time then dispersed. In larger populations in less urban areas, social groups of close kin with shared maternal dominance submission due to a group of aggression between groups has been observed. In both areas, female dogs were cooperatively to catch prey, females were bred by multiple males, there was poor paternal care and low pup survival (Bradshaw et al., 2009, Van Kerkhove, 2004).

Domestic Dog Behavior

I have been suggested that dogs may be descended from wolves that left packs to become scavengers at human dump sites (Coppening & Coppening, 2001). This niche would favor individuals who were self-sufficient and less wary of humans. A group of 16 feral domestic dogs in a group were observed to show dominant/subordinate behavior with one another but no clear hierarchy could be determined. A few dogs stayed away from others so no relationships could be determined. Several others did not show dominance over anyone (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

Further Information

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Observations from Pet Behavior Consulting

I worked as a pet behavior consultant in Knoxville, TN from 2006-2009. Prior to consultation, many of my clients were practicing some form of dominance-based dog training.

Poor Results

Narrow focus on dominance, prevented clients from making other observations that could have accurately explained and produced better results (source). Observations of aggressive interactions within a group of dogs are not always clearly reveal one of several defined social structures (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

Facts and Understanding

Social dominance is a relationship between two animals established over time by repeated competitive interactions (Drews, 1993). Observations of aggressive interactions within a group is not always clearly reveal one of several defined social structures (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

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Wolf Behavior - Older Studies

Earlier wolf studies (1940s-1980s) involved unacquainted wolves put into captivity to breed freely (Mech, 1970). Scientists concluded that wolves are polygamous and females in wild wolf packs control all resources and activities through aggression and that the most aggressive animals achieve the highest rank and get the most chances to breed and, therefore, evolution favors aggression (Mech, 1978).

Wolf Behavior - More Recent Studies

Wild wolves are family packs usually composed of one breeding pair and one or more litters of offspring (Mech 1999 & 2000). Displays of dominance and submission within the family pack are ritualized and non-aggressive (Mech, 1999, 2000 & 2001).

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