

Debunking the Dominance Theory in Dogs

Dominance and Dogs: True or False?

Everyone who has ever had any kind of behavioral problem with their dog has probably been told by someone, “You’re not the leader. Your dog is being dominant.”

Not only is this misguided and outdated, some of the techniques used in classical dominance reconditioning can alter the relationship between an owner and his dog. In some cases, methodology like the ‘alpha roll’ can get an owner bitten.

What is Dominance Training Methodology?

Dominance training is based in the concept of making the dog submit in all circumstances. It is this trainer’s belief that if your dog is disobedient, never-mind the reasons, you are not the ‘leader of the pack.’

Methods for establishing dominance over dogs have included:

- The alpha roll or making your dog roll on its back for you.
- Ear pinching
- Neck grabbing to simulate a bite
- Direct eye contact and staring
- Hanging by leash and collar to make the dog gasp for breath

All of these maneuvers are very threatening and can be frightening. Rather than submission, it is not uncommon for dogs to growl and/or bite to ward off these perceived attacks by their owners.

Aggression Begets Aggression

There was a case where a woman contacted a trainer for assistance with her aggressive dog. She claimed the dog growled and bit her for no reason, but when the trainer watched the owner and dog interacting, what was really happening was the woman was using dominance theory to get her dog to do things. This created a lot of anxiety in the dog, and every time the woman looked like she was going to do something, the dog preemptively reacted with growling and biting. When the woman’s actions were changed to non-confrontational and were a positive based style of training, the growling and biting ceased.

What Is Wrong With Dominance Theory?

People have created dominance theory by watching mostly captive wolf packs. Dogs are not wolves, although descended from them. They have been domesticated for thousands of years. The ways in which they interact with us and other dogs is far more fluid than might be suggested by wolf and dominance theory. Wolves and wild dogs have little if any interaction in the wild with humans. They prefer to avoid; whereas, our domesticated dogs seek out human interaction.

How we interact with the canine species is what is important. Most people seek to use dominance theory in place of actual training. Your dog is not dominant if it jumps on you to greet you. Rather, you have not trained it not to jump! Your dog is not dominant if it exits a doorway prior to you. Rather you have not properly trained a wait command!

What to do Instead:

You and your dog have a partnership. You are the more responsible partner and you guide the relationship. If you don't guide it, your dog will fill the void you have left. Your dog wants you to tell it what to do in a respectful and intelligent manner.

To establish a healthy, working partnership with your dog:

- Establish rules and boundaries
- Let your dog know what you expect through training
- Motivate your dog to learn with praise, treats, and toys
- Be positive and consistent in your training
- A benevolent leader is more respected