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Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors
www.apbc.org.uk E: info@apbc.org.uk

My Dog's Being 'Dominant'... USEFUL OR OUTDATED CONCEPT?

SJ Evans (Jackador Dog Training And Behaviour), Dr Anne Mcbride

Common Belief suggests that dogs use aggressive behaviour to try and dominate humans and become pack leader or 'Alpha dog'. People think this is an inherited behaviour, part of the dog's genetics, as dogs are descended from wolves and this is the way wolves behave. The proposed solution is to intimidate the dog until they 'submit' to the human as their pack leader. This has included manhandling the dog by scruffing, placing dogs on their back, pinning them to the ground and staring into their eyes. In fact these human behaviours are scary and aversive to the dog and are not only misguided but also can lead to a range of behaviour problems, including more aggression. So why this belief? This belief was thought to be supported by data from studies conducted on captive wolves. But there were important flaws in this research that mean this dominance theory is simply not correct.



Where Does This "Dominance Theory" Fall Down?

Lots has been learned about dogs since the original studies. Indeed, scientists involved in the those studies have since said their conclusions were inaccurate. There are three main criticisms of the research.

First is that comparing a group of animal In a captive situation is completely irrelevant in trying to explain the 'normal' behaviour of that species in the wild. Groups of any animal (from mice to people) that are forced to exist together in a confined space are more likely to demonstrate displays of aggression. Imagine sticking a bunch of humans in a confined big brother house type set up, for life, and studying

their behaviour as an example of what's normal!

Second, wolves do not live in random groups, let alone in cramped spaces. Wild wolf packs are a family group, parents, aunts, uncles and pups. Many behaviours previously defined as being alpha/ dominant are in fact communication to keep the peace. The look, the growl or lifted lip are respected and responded to peaceably, avoiding the need for aggression. In addition, which wolf is the 'leader' changes according to the particular situation and based on the individual strengths of each

wolf. So, think of wolves off on a hunt. One may lead in finding (tracking) prey, another in organising the kill, and another is the expert in nanny skills and stays behind to look after the crèche of pups at the home den.

Thirdly, dogs are not wolves! Yes, dogs are 99.96% genetically similar to wolves. Likewise, humans share 99% of their DNA with chimpanzee... but we are very different! In fact we humans also share 90% of our DNA with mice! In the same way there are huge differences in the behaviour, ecology and physiology of dogs and wolves. Wolves have not evolved to live with humans in the same way that dogs have.

Dominance Theory - What it Really Says

Dominance Theory is a respected scientific concept, but it does not relate to the personality or genetic trait of an individual animal. Dominance is a description of the relationship between two individuals and is based on deference of one to the other. The dominant animal has preferential access to resources over the other, enabling them to obtain access to resources, such as food and resting place when they choose. This is done without aggression, but through the deferring individual (subordinate) peaceably giving up the resource.

The individual that gains access is said to have a higher “resource holding potential”. You cannot be born “dominant” as it requires at least two individuals in a specific situation to be labelled dominant or deferrer and these roles can switch for each individual depending on the individual’s resource holding potential at that time and in that situation. One’s resource holding potential also changes with age and health. This is a natural process of balance over access to resources, not a battle for being a despotic alpha leader.

But in the end somebody does have to be the decision maker, the benevolent leader. This is the individual who has a higher resource holding potential over another in a variety of situations. Both learn about their relationship through many non-aggressive, interactions. They are training each other! With you doing the training (and being responsible for the giving of the resource, rewards, praise etc) and your dog doing the learning, who is the decision maker? **YOU ARE!! - no aggression required!**



So Why is The Outdated Dominance Concept STILL HERE?

Regrettably for the welfare and sanity of our pets, and in the face of contradictory scientific evidence, people still talk about the dominant dog and how it must be over-powered. Using confrontational and aggressive methods to control dogs was a popular concept 30 years ago and has been popularised through various TV shows as well as on social media. Worse still, it continues to

thrive in the advice given by some trainers and behaviourists. One reason for its continuing popularity is that it can appear that these methods offer the “magic wand”, and to work in a very short space of time - as the dogs start to behave as if they are ‘calm and fine’. For the owners there is relief when their dog just stops doing the bad behaviour and this is powerful, It all makes great TV, but is

far from the truth. In fact, in response to inescapable and unpredictable human aggression the dog has shut down. Simply, she or he is too scared to do anything else. Think how you might behave if your boss, or parent was as unpredictable. This ‘calm’ behaviour will not last, your dog will no longer trust you and such methods lead to unwelcome and harmful consequences for you both.

So by Keeping This Concept What is it Doing to Our Dogs?

Aggression is all too often misinterpreted as an attempt at pack leadership. In fact, aggression can be born out of fear, anxiety, learning, social confusion and stress. This means fearful, anxious dogs are then subjected to scary and painful techniques aimed at making them submit to a higher power. This results

in dogs being forced into defending itself by showing aggression or becoming emotionally shut down/damaged, a state we humans know as depression.

These methods are also dangerous for owners, leaving them vulnerable to being bitten or attacked as

the dog tries to defend itself. Not surprisingly, the quality of relationship and bond the owner has with the dog can also be severely impacted. If your dog is growling, barking or doing any behaviour you label as “dominant” seek help to find the underlying cause and you will be able to move forward.