



Dealing with Dominance Aggression

Dogs are pack animals, much like wolves. The dog perceives the humane members of its family as members of its pack. Dominance in the pack is linear, which means that there can be only ONE leader, and no two dogs share the same level of dominance. Dogs don't expect equality, and it is natural for them to push toward the highest social position, that of alpha or top dog.

Dominant dogs are those with the strongest instinctive drive to push for the alpha dog position. This type of dog interprets kind owners as weak, and takes advantage of them to move toward the alpha position. Once it has achieved the dominant position in the family, the dominant dog expects its owners to respect its wishes and follow its direction.

In nature, two rivals for the alpha position fight, and the winner becomes dominant. The loser either assumes a lower status in the pack, or leaves. Humans, however, try to win the dog's affection by petting, spoiling, and allowing the dog to get its own way, all of which stimulates further dominance.

Important Facts Concerning Dominance

Dominance aggression expressed to people is normally directed toward family members, or people the dog is familiar with (members of its pack). Normally, aggression is expressed to people the dog perceives as threatening its social position (by hugging, petting on top of the head, standing over or direct eye contact). The events may range from a growl to a bite, and also occur when there is a conflict over a resource (food, toys, bed), when the dog doesn't get its own way, or when the dog is protecting a group member, object or territory. Very small children are rarely attacked.

The attacks of a dominant dog seem unprovoked, fast and often without threat (the dog doesn't growl before biting). The dog often has a glazed look to the eye before and during the attack, and immediately after seems contrite, remorseful, or unaware of exactly what occurred.

Dominance appears to be inherited. Overwhelming numbers of cases are purebred dogs, and most are males. Castration has little or no effect in reducing dominance, but it is recommended to reduce the level of aggression which the dominance produces and to prevent the transmission of this genetic defect to future generations.

Dominance is complicated because it may change relative to time, place and circumstance. However, it is consistent within each specific situation. Dominant dogs may show only one or two signs of dominance; they may resent a hand held over the head, they may protect food, toys or their bed, they may resist being moved off furniture, or they may resist grooming, nail trims or discipline.

Dominance is not fully expressed until 2-3 years of age. Once it is established, it is relatively permanent. Once the people in the family establish their dominance over the dog, problems related to dominance are usually solved. However, because these animals have a genetic predisposition to gain dominance, they will occasionally "test" you. Be aware of the signs and immediately prevent the dominance behavior if it should be expressed in the future.

Treating Dominance Problems

THINK LIKE THE DOG: you must become the alpha member of the pack. The dog must learn that nothing in life is free—you control everything. They must earn food, attention, touch, exercise and freedom from you. Consistent training is essential. The most dominant person in the family (the one the dog is least likely to growl at or bite) should dominate the dog first, and then the training should be generalized to all members of the family, including children.

TARIN THE DOG: to sit, stay, come, down, down-stay, and heel, in that order. The 20 minute down-stay, without the trainer present, is the most important to accomplish. If the dog will not go down, put a foot on the leash next to the dog's head and hold down. Say "down" and give a small food reward within a half a second of the command. Then use the command "stay" with a food reward. Reward every few seconds with food for staying down (always

say the command before giving the treat). Gradually increase the time between the “stay” and the food. This will help the dog realize that it can please you and be rewarded for good behavior. Try to involve everyone in the family. While you stand on the leash, even small children can give the command, immediately followed by the food reward. While you may need the help of a professional trainer, it is better to train the dog yourself rather than send it away.

AVOID ANY CONFRONTATION WHICH THE DOG MIGHT WIN: if you lose one confrontation a month, you will lose the benefit of all the training you have done. Do not discipline the dog. If the dog is performing some unwanted behavior, divert the dog’s attention by telling it to come and sit or go to its bed, and reward the dog for following your command.

REMOVE ALL VALUED ASSETS: (toys, bones, etc). You do not want the dog to have anything it may want to protect from you. Many dominant dogs growl if you walk by them while they are chewing a toy. You can easily prevent this type of behavior by removing all the dog’s valued possessions. This also shows the dog that you control his toys.

NO GAMES: Dogs win all games they play because the game only goes on as long as the dog wants it to. Winning a game increases the dog’s dominance. It is therefore important to avoid all games; chase, throw the ball, tug of war, wrestling, etc. although you may, in the future, be able to play retrieving games with your dog, you should **never** play rough games like wrestling or tug of war with a dog which tends to be dominant.

FEED THE DOG ONLY WHEN HE RESPONDS TO A COMMAND: The dog must realize that you provide all the necessities of life, including food. Make the dog sit or lie down before giving its meal. Do not feed your dog free choice. Give him meals only at specific times so he realized that you control the food.

DO NOT TOUCH THE DOG: for several weeks or longer. Touch is an extremely potent reward to the dog, so this is especially important and must include everyone the dog associates with. If the dog jumps up, rests against you, or demands petting, you must totally ignore him, move away yourself or tell the dog to go to his bed. Another alternative is to put him in a sit-stay in some other part of the room.

DO NOT ALLOW THE DOG TO SLEEP ON BEDS OR OTHER FURNITURE: If the dog is on furniture and you wish to get him off, call him to you and tell him to sit. Then you can reward him for sitting. If this problem starts to become serious, consider keeping a leash on the dog at all times, even in the house. If you have control of the dog by means of a leash, you are automatically dominant over him.

EXERCISE THE DOG ON A LEASH: for 15 minutes each day. While teaching the dog that you are dominate, his freedom should be restricted. They should always be exercised on a leash so that you control all movements.

It may be necessary to add specific conditioning techniques for each problem, speak to your veterinarian, it normally takes 6-8 weeks to establish dominance over a dog; after this time, you can revert to a more normal relationship with your pet, but you must always be alert for dominant behavior, and stop it immediately by using these techniques.