



Dominance and Dog Training

Association of Pet Dog Trainers Position Statement

There has been a resurgence in citing "dominance" as a factor in dog behavior and dog-human relationships. This concept is based on outdated wolf studies that have long since been disproven. Contrary to popular belief, research studies of wolves in their natural habitat demonstrate that wolves are not dominated by an "alpha wolf" who is the most aggressive pack member. Rather, wolves operate with a social structure similar to a human family and depend on each other for mutual support to ensure the group's survival.

Dogs are *not* wolves. The idea that dog behavior can be explained through the application of wolf behavior models is no more relevant than suggesting that chimpanzee behavior can be used to explain the intricacies of human behavior. While wolves and dogs share some similarities in behavior, there are many more significant differences. Dog training and behavior modification strategies that rely primarily on misinterpretations of wolf behavior are therefore irrelevant, ineffective and can lead to serious negative complications.

While dominance is a valid scientific concept, the term "dominance" itself is widely misunderstood, such as when it is used to describe the temperament of a particular dog. Dominance is not a personality trait but a description of a relationship between two or more animals and is related to which animal has access to valued resources such as food, mates, etc. It should not be used in any way to support the belief that dogs are out to "dominate" us, especially as that misunderstanding causes some people to respond with force and aggression. This only serves to create an adversarial relationship filled with miscommunication and even more misunderstanding. The unfortunate result is often anxiety, stress and fear in both dogs and humans towards each other. The use of techniques such as the "alpha roll" on dogs, which is based on these mistaken beliefs about dogs and wolves, has no place in modern dog training and behavior modification. Dogs often respond to this perceived threat with increased fear and aggression, which may serve to make a behavior problem worse and ruin the dog-owner relationship.

The APDT's position is that physical or psychological intimidation hinders effective training and damages the relationship between humans and dogs. Dogs thrive in an environment that provides them with clear structure and communication regarding appropriate behaviors, and one in which their need for mental and physical stimulation is addressed. The APDT advocates training dogs with an emphasis on rewarding desired behaviors and discouraging undesirable behaviors using clear and consistent instructions and avoiding psychological and physical intimidation. Techniques that create a confrontational relationship between dogs and humans are outdated. Modern scientifically-based dog training should emphasize teamwork and a harmonious relationship between dogs and humans that fulfills both species' needs. Most of all, it should be a fun and enjoyable experience for everyone involved.

The Association of Pet Dog Trainers encourages and supports continued trainer education in order to promote gentle, effective, fast, and fun ways to train dogs using the most up-to-date information and sound, scientifically-based methods.

The Association of Pet Dog Trainers

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