

Dominance in Dogs



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Dominance theory refers to the idea that domestic dogs regard their human family as a pack, and are instinctively motivated to gain higher status within that pack. This imaginary quest to become the pack leader or “alpha” is often given as the root cause for any number of unwanted behaviours, from aggression to house soiling, from jumping up at visitors to chewing shoes. Advocates of dominance theory will advise that these unwanted behaviours are a result of your dog believing they have a higher status within the pack than you do, and the solution is to “show the dog who’s boss”.

Unfortunately, “showing the dog who’s boss” normally involves using punishment based training methods. These can range from withholding affection or food, all the way up to physically violent techniques such as striking or jabbing the dog, or forcibly rolling him onto his back and holding him in place. These techniques are not only cruel and potentially dangerous, but are also totally outdated and unnecessary.



Dominance debunked

Luckily for dogs, our scientific understanding of canine behaviour is evolving all the time, and the majority of dog trainers continually adjust their methods accordingly. We now know that dominance theory is a myth, with no relevance to training our pet dogs.

- The idea of dominance theory originally came from early studies on groups of captive wolves. The researchers noted that the wolves would aggressively compete over resources such as food, with a pair of “alpha” wolves at the top of the hierarchy who would use physical force to keep their status. Since domestic dogs share a common ancestor with wolves, it was assumed that they must behave in the same way – and towards humans as well as other dogs!
- Later studies on wild wolves revealed that the reality is quite different. In the wild, wolves live in family groups composed of a breeding pair and their offspring of varying ages. Unlike captive wolves, family members are free to leave the group when ready and raise a family of their own. Rather than having a strictly enforced hierarchy, relationships are based on cooperation and communication. The breeding pair do not use force or aggression to maintain “alpha” status. The aggressive behaviour seen in the captive wolves was a result of unrelated individuals being kept together in an unnatural environment, where space was limited and stress levels were high.

- Not only do we now know that wolves do not strive to achieve dominance over their family members, but we also know that dogs and wolves are not the same! Domestic dogs are not directly descended from modern day wolves. They share a common ancestor; a different canine species from which they both evolved, but which was neither a domestic dog nor a modern day wolf. Since the domestication of dogs began, artificial selection has changed their behaviour a hugely (just as natural selection will have changed the behaviour of modern day wolves, compared to that common ancestor).
- Dogs have been subject to extensive selective breeding to maximise tameness and cooperation with humans. Studies have shown that wolves do not behave in the same way as dogs, even if they are raised as pets in a home environment.
- Studies on feral dogs (domesticated dogs living as strays) have shown that when allowed to behave naturally and without human intervention, dogs do not form structured packs with dominance hierarchies. They have fluid relationships, with groups forming and changing regularly. There is no aggressive enforcing of status, or attempts to become leader of the pack. When there is competition over a resource, dogs will tend to voluntarily defer to one another in order to avoid conflict (and it is not always the same dog “winning” in every encounter).
- Dogs know that humans are not dogs, and do not behave or interact with us in the same way as they do their own species.

We now know that unwanted behaviours actually have nothing to do with your dog trying to “dominate” you. Unfortunately, there are still a large number dog trainers recommending outdated, dangerous and inhumane training methods (many of which have popular television shows!). As a dog owner, it can be difficult to know which advice to follow, and which might actually be harmful to your dog. Forever Hounds Trust would advise against hiring any dog professionals who talk about dominance theory, or use punishment based training methods.

If you are having any issues with your adopted dog, please get in touch with our team of qualified behaviourists for help and support.

The information provided in this document provides general guidance on the matters outlined and is not intended to replace the need for you to take qualified and appropriate behaviour/training advice on these matters.

Please remember, that as an owner of a Forever Hounds Trust dog you have access to our team of qualified behaviourists and FREE behaviour and training advice. No matter what your behaviour or training question is, we are here to help. You can contact the team by emailing: behaviour@foreverhoundstrust.org

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