



Critters corner presents:

Dominance Aggression

Overview

Many kindly owners, in their effort to show their dogs love and affection, run into problems with some more dominant individuals. If the owners fail to display leadership, “spoil” their pets, and indulge them by allowing them to have their own way much of the time, some dogs will start trying to call the shots. What’s viewed as kindness by owners seems to be viewed as submissive behavior by some dogs, elevating their rank with respect to the owner.

Dogs were domesticated from wolves and as such are social animals that have retained many aspects of wolves’ hierarchical (“pack”) mentality. Dogs have no sense of equality and strive for a social structure with a leader at the top of the hierarchy and subordinates of various ranks stratified below the leader.

The status of individuals within the pack is established and maintained by submissive and dominant signals. In the absence of a direct challenge, control of the most valuable resources can be maintained by communicative signals, without the necessity for overt aggression. The problem arises when a dog that views himself as dominant perceives that he is losing control of a resource or is being challenged by a subordinate. For example, dogs that have established a degree of dominance over their owners may respond aggressively if the owner tries to interact with them while they are resting or in possession of a valued resource, such as a favorite toy or delicious food.

Restraint, handling over the top of the head or body, and prolonged eye contact can also elicit threats. Dominant dogs may attempt to control their owner’s behavior by demanding attention and then rebuffing the owner when they’ve had enough. Such dogs may use body blocks to control the owner’s movements. They resist discipline and rarely emit submissive signals, such as averting eye contact, lowering the body, and rolling over (unless they have been trained to enjoy a belly rub).

Dominant behavior is often directed toward family members or familiar people within the dog’s social group. Dominant dogs challenge other “pack” members that they regard as being of a similar or lower social status.

Finally, although the drive for dominance probably has an inherited component, learning is an important factor in terms of how the dog responds. It is important to recognize that dominance is an interaction between individuals. Once owners understand this concept, the necessity of establishing themselves as the benevolent leaders of the dog’s social group will make more sense.

Diagnosis

Dominance aggression is characterized by threats directed toward the owner when the dog feels challenged or threatened by the owner’s actions.

A complete physical examination is recommended to rule out any underlying medical condition that may be contributing to your dog’s aggressive behavior. If your dog receives a clean bill of health, a behavior specialist can evaluate your dog and provide an appropriate treatment plan as well as safety recommendations.

Therapy

1. It is important to avoid any further confrontations with your dog that he might win. This can be accomplished by identifying all situations in which your dog is likely to challenge you and avoiding all interactions and situations in which aggressive behavior may be evoked.

2. Obedience-train your dog to enhance your control and help you develop appropriate leadership skills. The most important commands your dog should be taught include, SIT, DOWN, STAY, and COME. Train your dog to obey a command before he receives any resource from you, including food, attention, toys, petting, and access to the outdoors. Teaching your dog that “Nothing in Life is Free,” that all gifts great and small must be earned by means of offering an appropriate response to a single-word command, promotes a relationship based on understanding and trust.

In order to accomplish this feat, you must remove all your dog’s valued assets so your dog cannot gain access to them on his own. Highly prized possessions often include delicious food treats, special toys, and comfortable furniture. One of the most valuable and difficult resources for owners to control is the attention they give to their dog. Keep in mind that social interaction is a very potent reward to your dog, so it is particularly important that you ignore any desire for affection from your dog. All attention must be earned by having your dog follow a command issued by you, responding in a deferent and respectful manner.

Do not discipline your dog with harsh training techniques. Physically correcting your dog inevitably will promote an escalation of aggression, resulting in further deterioration of your relationship with your dog. If your dog is misbehaving, distract him with an obedience command and reward him for a compliant response.

Reward your dog for obedient and subordinate behaviors. It is helpful to focus on teaching your dog what he should not do. Rather you should show your leadership by teaching and rewarding appropriate behavior, and ignoring him, if possible, when he misbehaves.

Home Care and Prevention

You should provide your dog appropriate daily aerobic exercise (off lead, running), a non-performance diet, and regular daily obedience training sessions. Training your dog to wear a head halter will increase your level of authority and thus control.

Because dominant dogs have the potential to inflict serious injury, it is important to not expose any family members to the risk of danger. The person for whom the dog has the most respect should initiate the obedience training and the “Nothing in Life is Free” program. Once your dog understands the new rules, each member of the family should follow the protocol so that your dog understands that his rank is below that of all family members.

Although some improvement may be noticed in the first week, it can take up to 8 weeks to establish a new social hierarchy within your home. Once your dog understands and accepts the new social structure, you may be able to relax the rules to some extent. However, you must always be on the lookout for any recurring dominance-type moves by your dog and be prepared to reinstate the training program in its entirety. It may be necessary to maintain some aspects of the dominance program indefinitely.

Prevention of owner-directed aggression is better than cure. Adopting a dog whose temperament is appropriate for your personality is of the utmost importance in this respect. Some dogs (both individuals and particular breeds) may be genetically predisposed to developing a dominant temperament so it is important that you research the breed as well as breed line before selecting a canine companion. Following adoption, you must establish your role as “benevolent leader” early on in your relationship with your new puppy. Obedience training and proper early socialization will help promote your pet’s confidence and respect.

Information In-depth

Wolves arrange themselves in social hierarchies known as packs. Within the group, there is usually a dominant (alpha) individual that holds the top ranking position, and then middle rankers and subordinates who hold various lower ranking positions. This social structure helps wolves hunt more efficiently, protect their young and territory, and settle internal disputes with minimal fighting.

The dominant position usually affords the alpha individual the most influence or control over other pack members, social situations, and desired resources such as food, resting areas, and mates. Assertive young wolves may challenge the leader of the pack, and if they are successful, may in due course, usurp the title. Longevity in the alpha position may provide a certain advantage, but will not prevent an assertive newcomer from trying to better his position. In nature, two rivals of near equal status may fight for the top ranking position, and the winner becomes dominant. The loser either assumes a lower status in the pack or leaves.

Dogs are social animals and retain elements of a pack lifestyle inherited from their wolf ancestors. Because of their innate "pack mentality," dogs don't expect equality and it is natural for them to push toward the highest social position.

Dogs enter into pack-like relationships with their owners. People often try to win a dog's affection by petting, spoiling, and allowing the dog to get his own way, all of which permit its dominance status to escalate. A dog with a strong desire to push to the top interprets kind owners as weak, and takes advantage of them to move toward the alpha position. Once a dog has achieved the dominant position in the family, it will then expect its owners to respect its wishes and follow its directions.

Dominance aggression may be displayed when a dog feels he is being challenged or is losing control of a resource or situation to someone he perceives as subordinate. The events may range from a growl to a bite. Whether dominance aggression is exhibited is influenced by a number of factors, including the dog's genetic temperament, the relative dominance of other individuals involved (in wolf packs closer ranking individuals below the alpha position have more disputes), and the dog's motivation to control a particular resource. Typical situations in which dominance aggression is displayed include:

- Approaching or disturbing the dog while he is resting
- Physical punishment
- Prolonged eye contact or staring
- Restraint or handling
- Attempting to remove a resource the dog considers valuable (food, toys, preferred family members)

Dominance aggression is difficult for owners to fathom because it is expressed inconsistently, being influenced by time of day, location, and the circumstance. However, it is consistent within each specific situation. Dominant dogs may show only one or two signs of dominance; they may object to being petted on the head; they may protect food, toys or their bed; or they may resist grooming, nail trims or discipline.

Dogs may challenge some family members, but not others. Children are particularly vulnerable because of their small stature and erratic behavior. It is critical that family members establish their leadership over their dog. However, control should not involve physical punishment. Physical punishment does not build respect - it incites retaliation. You should not engage in scruff-grabbing, pinning or other forms of rough handling because such techniques are inappropriate and may well lead to increased aggression.

Dominance may have a genetic basis since certain breeds are predisposed. Castration is recommended to prevent the transmission of this hard-to-manage trait to offspring. Males are much more likely to display dominance aggression than females. Castration helps to reduce dominance aggression. Approximately 25 percent of dogs can be expected to show a 50 to 90 percent level of improvement after castration.

Dominance aggression usually peaks between 18 to 24 months of age, as the dog reaches social maturity. Since dominance arises from learned social interactions, dogs are not born dominant, only with a tendency for dominance to develop. Young dogs that are predisposed to developing dominance may periodically challenge their owners. Potential warning signs in young dogs include excessive "mouthiness," body blocking, pushing or leaning on the owner, growling when disturbed, and resisting handling particularly of the feet or head.

Once the family establishes leadership over the dog, problems related to dominance can often be resolved. However, it is important to monitor your dog's position in the family hierarchy on a regular basis and to take measures, if necessary, to prevent a resurgence of dominant behavior.

Therapy In-depth

The two primary cornerstones of therapy for the dominant dog are to avoid confrontations and ensure that your dog earns every valued resource by responding properly to a command that is issued. This attitude will, in time, cultivate your dog's dependence, respect and reliance, and thus your leadership and influence.

Avoiding Aggression

This is an essential component of the program and if not employed, will undermine all your other efforts. Dominant dogs usually win confrontations because they either growl and the owners back down or they

don't back down and the dog bites. Constant aggressive interactions will cause your dog to always be on guard and ready for the next challenge to his perceived social rank.

- Make a list. Complete a list of circumstances that elicit aggression from your dog, including those situations that induce growling and lip lifts as well as snaps and bites. Once you have compiled your list, you need to devise ways to avoid these negative interactions. As benevolent as avoidance sounds, this really is not a lenient technique. For example, if your dog growls when you pet him on top of his head, don't do it. Instead, pet him in a way that he enjoys by, say, scratching his chest or stroking the side of his face or neck. It is a good idea to avoid petting your dog when he is eating, resting, or otherwise engaged, or when your attention may not be appreciated. If your dog tries to guard specific toys or delicious food treats, you can prevent this problem by removing all possessions that trigger possessive aggression, including toys, bones, and rawhides. Your dog should not have access to anything he tries to guard from you. If your dog steals an object, ignore him if the object is harmless and not valuable. If you need to retrieve the object, distract your dog with a command and offer a more interesting alternative such as going for a walk.

If your dog threatens you during grooming or nail trims, take him to a groomer instead. A common situation in which dominant dogs bite their owners occurs when the dog is prevented from achieving some objective by being grasped by the collar or scruff. To avoid such problems it is essential that your dog be trained to respond to the basic obedience commands. If necessary, you can also leave a lightweight indoor leash attached to your dog's buckle collar so that you can control him from a distance. You may need to consult with a specialist behaviorist to develop safe and effective ways to avoid confrontations with your dog if simple avoidance is does not seem possible.

Don't allow your dog on furniture if such luxury incites him to challenge you. Being on the same level, either because the dog is on furniture or the owner is on the floor, can increase dogs' sense of authority and in this situation aggressive encounters are more likely.

- Don't give in. Demanding what they want, and getting it, is another way that dominant dogs exercise control over compliant owners. Constantly responding to your dog's demands will undermine your authority and create an atmosphere favorable for the expression of aggression. Completely ignore all demanding behavior from your dog. Having said that, going against a dominant dog's will can also get you bitten so you need to use good judgment to keep yourself safe.

- Teach basic commands. In order to begin the "Nothing in Life is Free" portion of the program, your dog must understand a few basic commands such as "come," "sit," "down," and "stay." In the early stages of training, it is not imperative that your dog obeys every command at first, as long as you feel sure your dog understands the commands issued and is in a position to obey if he chooses to do so. Once your dog understands the ground rules, you should work toward a speedier and more compliant response. If your dog does not obey a command, he should be ignored for at least 5 minutes. Don't give him a second chance by issuing an additional command and don't turn the situation into a battle by trying to make him obey. If your dog sits before you issue the command, ask for a different response.

- Give rewards. Remind yourself that your dog can have anything he wants if he is prepared to work for it. Remember to reward all spontaneous good behavior. Your dog must learn that nothing in life is free and that you control all valued resources. From now on, your dog will have to respond to a command (work) before he receives food, attention, toys, exercise, and freedom. Consistent training is essential. In order for your dog to be motivated, everyone in the family should follow the program and ration the various resources your dog receives. The person the dog is least likely to growl at or bite should train the dog first, and then the training should be generalized to all members of the family, including children.

- Control the food supply. Since food is such a valued commodity, it is imperative to make your dog realize you control this valuable asset. Your dog must earn all food (including treats) from you by responding positively to a command given by you. Your dog may hold out for a while before he will obey a command to receive food at first, but most dogs fold early on. Once your dog has earned his food he should be allowed 15 minutes to eat, after which any surplus food should be picked up. To avoid a confrontation, do not pick up the food in your dog's presence.

- Ration petting. Petting, and the acknowledgment that goes with it, is a powerful reward for most dogs and as such should be rationed in the same way as food. Petting of any description and at any time has to be on your terms to send a clear signal of your leadership. Do not submit to your dog's demands for petting. Ask that the dog "say please" by sitting in response to a command in order to receive the petting he desires.

However, petting can also become an annoyance for some dogs if it is improperly performed, rendered by the wrong person at the wrong time, or if it continues beyond a certain welcome period. In the latter instances, petting may actually trigger aggression. Petting sessions should be brief enough to leave your dog wanting more although, be warned, some dogs will bite if you shortchange them. The appropriate duration of petting is a judgment call. If in doubt, do not pet your dog at all for several weeks until other aspects of the dominance control program are in place.

- Ration praise. Praise can be another highly valued asset for which dominant dogs should be required to work. Praising a dog continuously dilutes the value of this otherwise much appreciated acknowledgment. Praise (and petting) can be thought of as money for a dog and can be used to command the same kind of respect. If you control and ration both praise and petting, your dog will view you in a more authoritative light.
- Use toys as rewards. The provision of toys is a privilege for which dominant dogs must work. After you have picked up all the toys, store them in an assigned drawer or cabinet. Supply a toy only after your dog obeys a command.
- Ration games. Games are fun, and as such should be rationed. You need to initiate all activities and you decide when they are over. Rough games like slap boxing, wrestling, tickling, and tug-o-war may promote aggression and should be avoided.
- Let your dog earn freedom. Freedom is one of life's privileges and with privilege comes the need for social responsibility and respect. If your dog barks at you or paws at the door to communicate that he wants to go out, ignore him at first. In order to obtain freedom, your dog must conform to new house rules by sitting or lying down when instructed to do so in order to earn the opportunity to cavort, chaperone-free in your fenced-in yard. Given a dominant dog's potential for aggression, if you do not have a fenced yard then your dog should always be escorted on lead.

Home Care

A minimum of 20 to 30 minutes of sustained aerobic exercise daily is necessary to make exercise a worthwhile therapy. Walking a mile or two with your dog is not really enough for most young, fit dogs. Brisk walks and games of fetch or Frisbee are excellent forms of exercise. Simply turning your dog out in the backyard is often insufficient, since many dogs do not really push themselves to the maximum.

Practice obedience training for a few minutes each day since you will be using commands for control. Make the sessions fun using treats, praise and toys for motivation.

If your veterinarian approves, feed a quality non-performance artificial preservative-free diet for a trial period of 2 to 4 weeks to see if there is any improvement in your dog's behavior. Change the diet over 3 days to avoid intestinal upsets.

We recommend that all dogs with aggression issues be trained to wear a basket muzzle. Your dog will be able to pant, take treats, and drink water, but will not be able to bite. Training your dog to wear a head halter will give you more control over your dog. Halters may reduce the number of aggressive incidents with which you have to contend since they tend to subdue many dogs. However, beware of head shy dogs who may become aggressive when you try to put the head halter on because they don't like you messing around with their muzzles.

Improvement peaks about two months after implementation of the program. After that time, you can revert to a more normal relationship with your dog though some rules must stay in place. How far you can relax your guard depends on your dog, but for most dominant dogs at least half of the above measures must remain if the improved status is to be maintained. Dogs that have developed dominance always have the potential to revert to their old ways should you lower your guard too far. Therefore, you must always be alert for dominant behavior and curb it immediately by re-instituting a full non-confrontational dominance program.

Finally, it is essential that dominant dogs are never left unsupervised in the presence of young children. Children may unwittingly trespass on the rules of the hierarchy simply by walking past the dog or taking a toy, stick or having food that the dog wants. If a dominant dog feels his authority is being threatened, he may warn children by growling or may simply punish them by snapping or biting. Avoid having your dog in close contact with children and/or ensure the child's safety by having your dog wear a basket muzzle. Remember, both children and dogs can be unpredictable. Dominant dogs tend to bite children on the face, rather than on

the hands or arms as they do with adults. It is imperative when children are involved that you avoid any situations in which your dog may become aggressive. The best way to achieve this is to control the child.