



The inside scoop on indoor animals

# Dog Nose News

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## Feature

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## Debunking the **Dominance** Myth

**Are dogs lying awake at night plotting a coup?**

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**H**ave you ever wondered if your dog is dominant? Chances are you have, if only because over the last half century, every canine misbehavior from house soiling to door dashing has been deemed a “dominance” problem.

Your dog growls at visitors? Dominance, say well-meaning friends. He doesn't always come when called? He's telling you he's boss, according to popular dog books. She pulls on leash or jumps up to greet you? She's declaring alpha status. He prefers couches to floors? Watch out!

Perhaps the most unlikely behaviors heard attributed to dominance are coprophagia (stool eating) and fetching a ball.

How did dominance become one of the most popular and unthinking labels ever bandied about in dog circles?

## ***A catchy concept***

The concept of dominance — or “alpha,” meaning the highest ranked individual — originally came from some studies of wolf packs in the 1940s. The concept was catchy, and when it trickled down to popular dog culture, it took hold with the power of mythology. It quickly became “common knowledge” that domestic dogs are naturally dominant or will become so if their people tolerate certain behaviors. These dogs, it was claimed, will constantly challenge and test their owners until they are forcefully shown human leadership.

So-called dominance exercises were — and in some circles still are — widely recommended to prevent the dog from taking over the entire household. These exercises include not feeding him until after you’ve eaten, letting him through doorways only after you, forbidding access to furniture, and not playing tug-of-war.

In reality, there is no evidence that these procedures prevent dominance aggression or any other behavioral problem. One study found no correlation between playing tug-of-war or allowing a dog on the bed and the development of aggressive behavior.

## ***Extreme treatment***

Beyond those exercises, many authors and trainers urged owners to hold or force their dogs into submissive positions, sometimes roughly, to the point of creating fearful responses. Today, some call these “gentling” exercises and recommend using them with puppies.

For example, you roll or flip your puppy on her back, and don’t let her up until she stops resisting. The claim is beguilingly simple: by forcing a dog to assume a submissive posture and then rewarding her for tolerating it, you teach her to submit to your leadership.

But notice the claim’s unspoken assumption that leadership is gained through force. In canine society, leadership is not won through brute physical domination. And a wide range of dogs with normal, sociable temperaments naturally will resist being forced on their backs, even to the point of defensive aggression.

Humans are not that different. Think how you would react if your boss established his or her “leadership” by physical force!

The technique has morphed further into a facile test of dominance. Force a dog on his back, and if he resists, he’s dominant! Instant (albeit wrong) diagnoses have wide appeal in homes, animal shelters, obedience schools, and even veterinary clinics.

Some so-called experts even suggest using violent techniques like scruff shakes and alpha rolls. At the extreme end, some trainers once advocated downright abusive methods, such as hanging a dog by a choke chain and leash (called helicoptering) until she passed out, or forcing her head underwater until she lost consciousness.

These tactics were considered treatment for behaviors as mild as digging or as serious as aggression.

## ***Flaws of the wolf-pack studies***

Unfortunately, our collective preoccupation with doggy dominance hasn't served us or our dogs well. To begin with, it's based on some outdated and flawed science as well as a fair amount of nonsense.

Dr. Ian Dunbar outlines three major flaws of the studies of wolf packs in the 1930s and 1940s. First, they were short-term and focused on the most obvious facet of wolf life, namely hunting. As a result, the studies gathered unrepresentative data and drew rather sweeping conclusions about wolf behavior (and later, dog behavior) based on about 1% of wolf life.

Second, the researchers observed what are now known to be ritualistic displays and misinterpreted them. The bulk of dominance mythology comes from these misinterpretations.

Take alpha rolls. The early researchers thought that the higher-ranking wolf forcibly rolled subordinate wolves to exert his dominance. Modern studies have shown that alpha rolls are part of an appeasement ritual offered voluntarily by the subordinate wolf, not forced by the superior.

A subordinate wolf offers his muzzle, and when the higher-ranking wolf "pins" it, the subordinate rolls over and presents his belly. There is no force. Canine behaviorist Jean Donaldson, author of the award-winning book *The Culture Clash*, says, "The truth is, there is not one documented case of a wolf forcefully rolling another wolf to the ground. Nor is there one case of a mother wolf (or dog) 'scruff-shaking' her puppies."

A wolf would flip another wolf against its will only if he were planning to kill it. The same goes for a mother shaking her pup by the scruff. Both are rare events.

The third flaw was that the researchers made some wild extrapolations from their data. Their first leap of logic was applying their conclusions to dogs. Their second was applying them to human-canine interactions.

## ***Dogs aren't watered-down wolves***

The fact is, dogs aren't wolves. Wolves are dogs' closest relatives — just as chimpanzees are ours — but dogs became a separate species possibly as long as 135,000 years ago. Although dogs retain some characteristics of wolves and other canids, thousands of years of domestication, co-evolution with humans, and selective breeding have changed them profoundly.

Dunbar once said, "Saying 'I want to interact with my dog better, so I'll learn from the wolves' makes about as much sense as saying 'I want to improve my parenting — let's see how the chimps do it.'"

Applying the wolf studies to human-canine interactions was nonsense, according to Dunbar. Despite the flimsy evidence, books and methods abounded, exhorting owners to be "leader of the pack." They portrayed an adversarial human-canine relationship and advocated combative training methods that relied on force, punishment, and even pain. After all, force was thought to be necessary to put ambitious dogs in their place.

In her book *Dog Friendly Dog Training*, Andrea Arden writes, “Rather than teaching our best friends, we were advised to physically dominate our dog to bring him into line.”

In stark contrast to the popular myth of wolves (and dogs) ruling with an iron paw, however, wolves’ and dogs’ social structure is much more complex, flexible, and subtle.

### ***Benevolent leadership***

Based on better and longer studies of canines, scientists have learned that the mark of a true leader is the ability to control without force, according to Dr. Myrna Milani, a veterinarian and behaviorist. She points out that, in the wild, animals who rule with brute force get eliminated from the gene pool, because force requires so much energy and puts the animals at high risk of death, injury, or predation.

Instead, the vast majority of alpha dogs lead benevolently. They do not stoop to physical domination to prove their points. They don’t need to. They lead through subtle psychological control, such as confident posture, withering glances, staring, stalking, dogging (persistently hassling), barking, or growling.

It’s all ritualistic. Day-to-day interactions are based largely on deferential and cooperative behaviors, and conflicts are settled by elaborate displays designed to inhibit aggression or turn off threats.

So despite popular myth, alpha does not mean physically dominant or most aggressive. It means in control of resources. A leader is one who has earned the right to control whatever resources he or she thinks are important. What’s important is flexible. It changes depending on the dog’s motivation, the context, and the situation at the moment. So an alpha dog might give up a prime sleeping place because he couldn’t care less, or relinquish a succulent bone because she’s lost interest.

### ***Maintaining order through submission***

Another assumption of pack theory was that wolves, and therefore dogs, organized themselves in a fixed, linear dominance hierarchy — a chicken-like pecking order in which the dominant animals maintain order by threatening and intimidating underlings.

Now experts agree that wolves form an appeasement (also called subordination) hierarchy, in which subordinate animals maintain order through active displays of submission and deference.

Donaldson offers the Army as a human analogy. Lower-ranking soldiers first salute their superiors with a flourish and then get a cursory salute in return. This is a classic appeasement hierarchy. A general doesn’t enter a room and throw his weight around. He simply appears and everyone starts saluting.

But going beyond observations of wolf behavior, modern researchers have studied the behavior of village, feral, and companion dogs to understand canine social structures better.

These scientists observed loose social structures that were flexible and unpredictable. The structures observed were determined more by factors like food availability and human

intervention than by any innate sense of social hierarchy. These same experts now emphasize the importance of treating the domestic dog as the distinct species it is, not as a sort of watered-down wolf.

### ***Problems with the dominance label***

Another main flaw of dominance theory is the term itself. A cornerstone of science is precise, unambiguous definitions that facilitate communication. Ethological terms like dominance are not precise definitions but are constructs used to label and summarize a range of behaviors. One problem with constructs, psychologists Drs. Garry Martin and Joseph Pear point out, is that they lead to circular reasoning.

For example, a dog that growls when approached near her food bowl might be labeled dominant. Then if you ask the owner why the dog growls, she'll answer, "Because she's dominant." So the label becomes a pseudoexplanation for the behavior.

The label also can affect the way the animal is treated. The dominance label has been used to justify punishing dogs, especially those that react defensively to force-based training methods. The label also tends to focus attention on problem behaviors rather than on teaching and rewarding good ones.

A related term, dominance aggression, is similarly problematic. What does it mean? There's no scientific consensus on how to define it academically, much less on how to identify it in the real world.

In *Pet Behavior Protocols*, Dr. Suzanne Hetts, an applied animal behaviorist, writes, "Sometimes it's very difficult to categorize aggression more specifically than offensive or defensive. The behavioral descriptions of when aggression occurs and the associated body postures often don't fit well into any of the classification schemes in the scientific literature on aggression. In addition, dogs may display more than one type of aggression, which contributes to the difficulty in categorization."

If behavior as obvious as aggression is so difficult to categorize, how accurate can it be to label subtle, everyday behavior as "dominant"? It's a judgment that presumes to understand dogs' motives when, in fact, we have no idea what they're thinking. There are dozens of possible causes, functions, or motives for any problem behavior.

### ***Moving past the label***

In many aggression cases, the history and description of the dogs' behavior are inconsistent with our traditional understanding of dominance. So-called dominant dogs often show ambivalent, fearful, and anxious body language. They may shake and act very submissively during and after a bite. Studies show that dogs displaying "dominance aggression" get less exercise, are more fearful of people, are more excitable, and react more to high-pitched noises. All this is inconsistent with our notion of the fearless, dominant dog and suggests other factors at play in aggressive behavior.

This new information challenges us to interpret the social relationship between dogs and owners in a more sophisticated way than as simplistic dominant-submissive relationships.

Fortunately, behavioral science and most dog trainers have moved past the flawed dominance label. A new term being used for dominance aggression is status-related aggression. Treatment focuses on teaching and rewarding the dog for desired behaviors, regardless of status. It also seeks to identify the many other possible causes of problem behaviors, such as fear or anxiety, insufficient socialization, boredom, lack of exercise, too little companionship, or lack of training.

## **How to lead with brains, not brawn**

Far more dogs are unruly than status-seeking, according to Dr. Suzanne Hetts. No one taught them basic obedience. In the absence of structure and consistent rules, they've learned annoying, attention-getting behaviors. And some are pushy, like children who test their parents' limits to see what behavior they can get away with.

**The way to regain control over your unruly or pushy dog and create an enjoyable companion is** through training. Positive, dog-friendly training opens a window of communication between two species that can't talk to each other. In private or group classes, owners learn the basic ways that dogs learn. When they apply these "laws of learning" to their companions, dogs start cooperating, and everyone seems relieved and delighted to have discovered a common language.

### **Some tips for getting started:**

- Find a positive (no-force, reward-based) training class so the two of you can learn how to communicate.
- Memorize at least two basic laws of learning: 1) all animals (and young children) learn by the immediate — not delayed — consequences of their behavior, and 2) behaviors that meet with rewarding consequences will happen more often.
- Leverage valued resources like food, toys, play, walks, and petting. Don't give them away for free. Use them as rewards for good behavior, like sit or down.
- Master the technique of giving resources for desirable behavior and withholding them for undesirable behavior. It's like teaching a toddler that a soft "please" gets her a cookie but a shouted "Gimme!" gets her nothing. In short, reward deferential, polite behaviors and ignore pushy ones.
- Learn to set your dog up for success and prevent mistakes. Your dog chews shoes? Don't leave shoes lying around. Instead, introduce her to the joys of chewing on stuffed Kongs. Your dog potties in the house? Don't let him run around unsupervised, and make sure you take him outside on a reliable schedule and reward him when he potties there. Your dog digs in the garden? Get her hooked on her own "legal" digging pit by burying tasty bones there. Once the good habit is set, you can interrupt mistakes and redirect her to her legal area.