

# Debunking Dominance



Learning Shouldn't Hurt

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## Why you don't have to be your dog's "alpha"

The notion of dominance in dogs stems from a misunderstanding of wolf pack research that was then applied to pet dogs. Unfortunately, the notion stuck. It was always likely to stick, because we humans organize ourselves in hierarchies so the idea seems utterly plausible to us. But even if the dominance principle applied to wolves—research now definitively shows it doesn't—pet dogs are no more wolves than we are chimpanzees.

## It can hurt the relationship between you and your dog



The term *dominance* is a label, not a solution. What's more, it sets up a conflict. If I believe my dog to be dominant it follows that I must make him submit to me. This often results in an ongoing battle of will that is unpleasant for both of us.

A much more useful approach is to leave out labels altogether and simply describe what your dog is doing, decide what you want him to do instead, and then make a plan to help him change his behavior.

What is important is the good relationship between you and your dog, and getting

training results that allow you to live harmoniously together. Good training sets the human and the dog up to both get what they want so everyone is happy. For example:

- Reward behaviors you like. That will make them happen more often.
- Ignore behaviors you don't like. That will make them happen less often.
- Practice *nothing for free*. Ask your dog to sit for doors to be opened, balls to be thrown, leashes to come off at the park, etc. This makes asking politely your dog's main strategy for getting what he wants, instead of using pushy, obnoxious behavior.

With methods like these, everyone wins. You get a happy, well-behaved dog and your dog gets to chase balls, sniff other dogs, and eat treats, all of which are high on his list of priorities.

## How could being the Pack Leader hurt?

A study by Veterinary Behaviorists of the Matthew Ryan Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, asked clients what methods they had used in the past, and how the dog responded. (Applied Animal Behavior Science 117 (2009), 47-54)

**The authors divided the methods** used by owners in response to their dog's misbehavior into the following categories: "Aversive: Direct Confrontation" (alpha rolls, leash corrections, "dominance down," hit or kick, neck jab, putting on a muzzle, etc.), "Aversive: Indirect Confrontation" (Yell "NO," Say "Schhhht," stare down, growl at dog), "Non-Aversive: Reward-Based" (Food, "Watch Me," Clicker Training, Sit for everything) and "Neutral" (Avoid, increase exercise, pheromones).

**Here are the numbers that matter:**

- 43% of dogs responded with aggression to being hit or kicked
- 38% to having an owner grab their mouth and take out an object forcefully,
- 29% to a "dominance down,"
- 26% to a jowl or scruff shake.

**Violence begets violence, aggression begets aggression.**

## I saw it on TV!

Dog training born out of "dominance theory"—which includes alpha rolls, physical corrections, and flooding—is based on a now-debunked premise around wolf hierarchy.

- Physical corrections and alpha rolls trigger a dog's instincts to "shut down," which should not be mistaken for *calming* down. This stress actually produces the opposite effect: the dog becomes more fearful.
- Fear leads to increased cortisol levels, which leads to long-term health issues.
- Most misbehavior is not an attempt to show dominance. But rather a result of poor training or inadvertent reinforcement of unwanted behaviors
- Dominance and submission describe relationships, not a particular individual's role.

This is not to say that Cesar Millan is a bad guy. He's a rescue advocate. He knows the value of mental and physical stimulation. He knows that dogs are not people and require different teaching and coping mechanisms.

However, he could achieve success by educating himself on training and behavior methods, abandoning harmful and unnecessary tactics with solutions that are just as effective, infinitely less dangerous, and accessible to all.

## Learn and decide for yourself

Call us or take one of the many offered on-line dog language and communication course. Learn to recognize:

- Fear
- Appeasement
- Displacement
- Excitement
- Stress

Watch dogs on TV and see for yourself what they're telling you!