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Dumbed down by dominance, Part 2: Change your dominant thinking

By Karen L. Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, Dipl. ACVB, CAAB

Embrace deference, not dominance, to ensure healthy and happy human-pet relationships

Last month in "Dumbed down by dominance," we looked at the relationship dogs and humans developed over a vast history and how the idea of dominance in this relationship and the concept of dominance aggression arose inappropriately. Now let's see how we can change our thinking.

Changing our thinking



Fights for status or control are notoriously rare among wild canids, including wolves. The same is true for humans. Unless the situation involves abnormal or severely stressed social conditions (e.g., famine, war, too many individuals and too few resources), most human social relations are structured by negotiation and deference to others, rather than by violence. The same pattern holds for dogs. In short, in both dog and human interactions, violence is often a sign that something has gone wrong.

Reliance on the myth of dominance often results in unkind or abusive behavior toward dogs in ways that render the situation dangerous for humans and dogs alike. An understanding of social rules that rely on deference can help us to avoid the unfair, cruel and often dangerous behaviors that are the result of being dumbed down by dominance.

What do we mean by *deference*? Deference occurs when social individuals assess an ongoing situation and wait calmly to get input from another member of the group before pursuing another set of behaviors or social interactions.

In deference-based systems, hierarchies are fluid and flexible depending on context and the information received within it. The individual to whom others defer may differ depending on the social circumstances; and status and circumstances are not absolute.

For example, a human child may defer to his or her parents' requests but then be the individual on the playground to whom other children defer. Dogs are similar: A dog may always adhere to instructions given by one spouse but not the other. This is because the dog has different relationships with each spouse.

A lot has been written about dogs viewing their human families as their "packs." It's important to remember that *pack*

is just a word to describe a social grouping of canines, like *pod* describes a group of whales and *gaggle* describes a group of geese.

True canine packs are composed of animals born into the social group, making them more closely related to each other than they are to most animals in another pack. Most multidog households are composed of unrelated dogs, many of which come into the household as young adults or adults, not newborn puppies. The way most dogs live in human households is almost the anti-pack: Relationships are imposed upon resident dogs every time a new animal is added.

By thoughtlessly using the word *pack*, we have assumed that humans must be the leaders of the pack. This assumption has caused us to behave badly toward animals. While we care for dogs, they know that we are not dogs, and their relationships with dogs and humans will differ. We can best understand the complex interdependent relationship between dogs and humans by letting go of the pack concept.

Doing better by dogs

To successfully understand and interact with dogs, we must understand that dogs ask questions. Sometimes they do this by offering a series of behaviors and then waiting for the change in human response, by vocalizing, by pawing at us or by sitting quietly and looking at us. This last behavior is the one that gives us the time and space to exchange information with our dogs.

Interacting with a dog is not about having dominion over the dog. It's about signaling clearly to the dog and being reliable so that the dog learns to take its clues about the appropriateness of its behaviors from you.

By understanding the evolutionary history of domestic dogs and our shared, interdependent, cooperative relationship with them, we can create a more effective strategy for managing canine behavioral concerns.

1. We should strive to avoid all circumstances known to be provocative to a dog. Our goal must be to avoid inadvertently reinforcing an inappropriate behavior or threatening the dog.
2. We should humanely interrupt problematic behaviors—without rewarding them—as early in the inappropriate sequence as possible.
3. We should watch carefully and reward dogs quickly for a wholly appropriate and freely offered behavior. By doing this, we inform the dog which of its behaviors are desired. It's utterly unfair to the dog to have it try to guess what it is that will stop the yelling and start the loving. Also, we could tell someone a million times what not to do, but unless we tell them what we want them to do, they will still make mistakes.

This simple pattern, based on the knowledge that dogs are cognitive and ask questions, allows learning and recovery to occur and dogs to improve in the absence of violence.

Escaping punishment

By refusing to be dumbed down by dominance, we can also change our perception of punishment. Physical punishment is often recommended for changing canine behavior and may include using leash or collar correction with choke or prong collars, using electronic shock correction, hitting the dog, walking the dog into a tree or pole so it will pay attention and tying a dog so it cannot move. All of these techniques are rooted in the concept of dominating the dog as a means of control. Some of these techniques involve outright abuse, and others are easy to use abusively. None of them is recommended.

The true definition of punishment doesn't require pain; it requires a stimulus sufficiently powerful that the undesirable behavior is abandoned by the dog *with the subsequent result that* the probability of the dog exhibiting the behavior *in the future* is lowered. The emphasized parts of this sentence are important because unless these conditions are met, the dog is not being punished; it is being injured mentally or physically.

Data-driven humane care

We can use this new scientific knowledge about dogs to help us address canine behaviors that we or the dog find

problematic. Fixing problematic canine behavior is actually not about control, leadership or mastery of the dog—it's about increasing the chance that you can signal clearly to the dog, that you have the dog's undivided attention while signaling, and that you are actually rewarding the behaviors that you desire.

As the data accumulate, our only choice is to accept that use of the dominance concept has encouraged techniques that are dangerous to owners and dogs alike and that are unfair and often abusive to dogs. For those wishing to use data to trump assertion, see the AVSAB dominance position statement [<http://>] and the Dog Welfare Campaign position statement [<http://>].


For hands-on, gut-level learning for children, I recommend the Blue Dog (thebluedog.org [<http://http://thebluedog.org>]; CD and booklet are available from the AVMA). In this interactive video, children (and their caregivers) are able to try out their behavioral responses on a virtual dog and, thus, learn about what could happen with a real one. Scientific validation of the beneficial effects of this program continues, with early studies showing that the Blue Dog reduces errors made by children 3 to 6 years of age with respect to their responses to dogs' behaviors.

Two short popular books on canine communication that may be of interest to most veterinarians and dog lovers are *Tail Talk: Understanding the Secret Language of Dogs* (Chronicle Books, 2007) and *The Canine Commandments* (Broadcast Books, 2007).

The really good news is that we can now choose to no longer be dumbed down by dominance.

Dr. Overall, faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania, is a diplomate of the American College of Behavior Medicine (ACVB) and is board-certified by the Animal Behavior Society (ABS) as an Applied Animal Behaviorist.



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