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Dispelling Myths about Social Dominance and Dog Behavior

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A client told us recently she had read that she needed to spit in her dog's food to show him who was boss. The theory, the article said, was if the dog tastes your saliva on his food he will understand you got to it first and are therefore the "Alpha" in the "pack."

We have no clue where this idea came from (it certainly didn't come from the scientific literature!), but it's likely related to another erroneous belief that people should never feed their dogs before the family eats. Doing so supposedly undermines the owners' "dominance" over the dog.

We've heard many, many silly claims like these about what dominance is supposed to be about, what owners should do to "be dominant" over their dogs, and listened to lists of behaviors dogs purportedly show to express "dominance" over people. Did you know that when dogs sit on our shoes or lean against us with their backs to us they are said to be expressing dominance over us? Or that allowing dogs to be ahead of us on walks or go through doorways first somehow makes them "dominant" over us? All of these claims demonstrate a remarkable lack of understanding about what social dominance refers to in the ethological literature.

Many in the dog training world have claimed that the "dominance" or "pack theories" of dog behavior are based on scientific studies of wolf behavior, which supposedly legitimizes the view that being "dominant" over our dogs is the best way to create mutually beneficial relationships with them. Most of us would agree that scientific explanations should carry more weight than non-scientific ones, but only if they accurately reflect what is really known about the phenomenon.

Turns out, the "it's all about dominance" explanations of dog behavior don't meet this criterion. In a 2008 article*, wildlife biologist Dr. David Mech, an internationally recognized expert on wolves, points out that the notion of "alpha wolf" and the struggle

to be “top dog” were based on observations of captive groups of unrelated wolves. These artificial social groups bear little resemblance to a pack of free living wolves, that (except for the breeding pair), are all related to one another. The idea that individuals in a family of wolves are engaged in constant daily struggles to best one another, and that our dogs do the same with us, is simply not true.

As Mech points out, a wolf pack operates much the same way a human family does (or should!) with the adults guiding and showing the youngsters how to survive in the world. Leadership naturally falls to the adults, parents don’t bully the youngsters, nor do the youngsters fight with their parents to gain control of the pack.

Invoking the poorly defined claim of “he’s trying to be dominant” as the explanation for a wide variety of dog behaviors just can’t stand up to critical analysis. For example, dogs pull to be ahead on walks because they are more excited and want to move faster than we do. We’ve yet to see a dog that growled at his owner to warn her to stay back at the end of the leash where she belongs. Our dogs would be grateful if we could keep up the pace they’d like to maintain!

One of many serious problems with these “dominance theories” is that it leads people to treat their pets in inappropriate and sometimes, inhumane ways. While spitting in a dog’s food is harmless, some of the other measures advocated by this school of thought are not. Scruff shaking, rolling and pinning dogs, shocking them, or stringing them up (hanging them by a collar and leash) to “show them who’s boss” not only elicit fear and can cause injury but also often result in dogs using defensive aggression to defend themselves. The end result of this damaging cascade is that behavior problems are mis-understood, the appropriate behavior modification techniques are never implemented, the dog is labeled “dominant” and dangerous and sometimes even euthanized.

If dominance isn’t the best way to think about relationships between dogs and people, or the most important aspect of their relationships, then what is? Social relationships among dogs and between people and dogs are complex so there isn’t a simplistic answer to this question anymore than there is one simple reason why a dog limps or doesn’t eat. However we do know that relationships among animals that live in social groups are based primarily on cooperation rather than confrontation and intimidation.

In our experience, dogs never receive sufficient feedback for good behavior, and often receive too intensely aversive feedback for unwanted behaviors. Dogs need guidance, consistency, and predictability from us in order to learn appropriate behavior. The “alpha” model of dog-human relationships does not help us create mutually beneficial relationships or prevent behavior problems.

*Mech, David L., 2008. Whatever happened to the term “alpha wolf?” International Wolf 18(4): 4-8. (Online access at <http://www.wolf.org/wolves/news/iwmag/2008/winter/alphawolf.pdf>)

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