

## **Canine Dominance Revisited by David Appleby**

The subject of how dominance should be defined is often discussed. In particular there has been criticism that it is often misdiagnosed as the cause of behaviour problems. Obviously such criticism is correct but some commentators have also tried to re-interpret the effect of the treatment programmes typically recommended for "dominance" problems. This new insight suggests that the benefits of any change in behaviour have nothing to do with the notion of dominance but the individual's response to situations. However it is possible that this interpretation describes the processes that occur at a local level i.e. how the individual feels at time when it is dominated.

Before we look at this issue we have to be careful to use correct terminology. To say that an individual is dominated would be wrong if we use the term out of context. In effect, dominance can be looked at as an equation. In simple terms this comes down to; do you normally get your own way plus something you want minus any concerns you may have about the ability of an individual who wants the same thing to stop you. If you think they can then you are likely to feel inhibited. If you and the other individual keep having incidents like this you should reach the point where you can anticipate who

will win and in what contexts this is likely to occur. Now you have a ranking system and one of you is dominant. Ranking systems have evolved in pack society because fighting decreases when everybody knows where they stand. Problems tend to occur in the human/dog relationship when owners convey signals that unwittingly cause their dog to develop a sense of high status. For example, an owner who readily hands over the food they are eating when their dog demands it may be developing in it a sense of high status in that context. This may encourage it to feel that it can challenge them in other situations. Of course this act on its own is unlikely upset the dog's perception of the appropriate ranking order but if it gets the wrong signals often enough it may think it is dominant.

However, scientists believe that a dogs do not have a sense of self so it could be more accurate to say that it behaves with no inhibition and it is uninhibited behaviour that we interpret as dominant behaviour. Owners often describe a belief that their dog is trying to increase its status over them. This would require that their dog has a capacity for forward planning and to know how its behaviour affects the feelings and thoughts of others, which we believe they are not capable of. So the notion that the dog behaves with lesser or greater inhibition according to who it is interacting with and the value of the resource in question may be a better way of describing what is going on.

[Click here for a more detailed look at what may encourage a dog to become uninhibited](#)

## **Behaviour Modification and Problem Prevention Programmes**

There are behaviour modification programmes that are suggested for reducing the sense of high status in dogs that have become unresponsive to their owners or challenge them for resources. The same advice is often given to stop these problems developing. These are variously described as status reduction, rank reduction, dominance, assertiveness or 'learn-to-earn' programmes. Whatever their title they could be said to work by increasing a dog's inhibition about doing its own thing or throwing its weight about or by preventing a loss of inhibition in dogs that are presently well behaved, particularly maturing and newly acquired dogs. There are five main criticisms of status related programmes.

- They are often inappropriate.
- Not following them does not necessarily result in the type of behaviour that we call dominant.
- The programmes tend to have a blanket set of rules not all of which are applicable to every individual.
- Where they are used successfully the effect of better behaviour is achieved by virtue of the fact that the dog becomes depressed and withdrawn. (This is the individual response referred to at the beginning of this article).
- The implementation of the programmes so changes the dog/owner relationship because of rules such as

don't let your dog sit on your lap, or not until it is invited, that owners are unwilling to keep them up.

Let's look at these in turn.

1. Misdiagnosis is always a bad thing and yet "dominant" behaviour is frequently cited for all sorts of relationship problems that have other causes. For example, we must avoid using the label to describe a lack of response to the owners wishes caused by insufficient or inappropriate training. Similarly dominance must not be blamed for defensive behaviour caused by fear of the owner's intentions. This often occurs where "punishment" is used in an attempt to stop the behaviours owners don't want.
2. You can do all the things the programmes say you should not do, such as letting your dog sleep on your bed, without the automatic development of problems related to lack of inhibition. However they can develop in this environment. Furthermore research has shown that "dominance" problems are more likely to occur if the owner tends to be indulgent. Only if it were shown that dogs regularly develop a lack of inhibition in homes where owners take control of the resources the dog values could prevention programmes be said to be irrelevant.
3. The tendency to have a set of rules for prevention that covers all resources is caused by the fact that it is not possible to know what each dog will value without studying them. Most owners will not be aware of the need or have the understanding that would enable them to do this. A wise man once said; "experienced owners can break all the rules and will know when to introduce them because they can see problems developing. Owners who do not have knowledge, experience or intuition will not know the problem is developing until the consequences

occur". This is what makes guidelines for people to follow helpful.

4. There seems to be little doubt that programmes introduced to cure a dominance problem can result in depression and withdrawn behaviour. It is thought that this is a reaction to failing to get anticipated pleasures such as portions of the owner's food or to lie on the sofa. This reaction is not in conflict with the intention of rank reduction (i.e. the development of inhibition). Wildlife films are the bastions of descriptions of dominant and submissive behaviour. On one of these we may see a wolf that expects to get tasty morsel. If another thwarts it by denying it access it may go through the same emotional process. However, as with the family dog, once its expectations are altered through repetition depressed and withdrawn behaviours should stop. Significantly, owners who are asked to implement these programmes report that depressed behaviour is only a transient stage.
5. Do owners stick to these programmes if they are introduced to cure problems? They do if they can see the benefit, which brings us back to the most important point, which is point one.

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