

The Dog In Your Living Room

If you have a dog, are you the pack leader? Are you sure that with Mum, Dad, 2.4 children and a dog, the dog has the lowest status in the pack?



For many years now dog owners have been told they must be the pack leader. Everyone in the family must be dominant over the dog, or it may become dominant over them. Any sign of human weakness, and a dog with a dominant disposition may take advantage and make a bid for a higher status within the 'pack'. This, we are told, is likely to lead to behavioural problems or the dog being stubborn in obeying commands. If this were to happen we were advised to implement a Rank Reduction Programme which includes, amongst other things, eating something before feeding the dog, not allowing him to sleep on your bed, not playing games of tug, and not allowing him through doorways first. In addition, as the dog's ancestor is the wolf, the Rank Reduction Programme is based on wolf behaviour, despite the fact we have a dog in our living room, not a wolf.

New research and new theories on dog behaviour have recently come to the fore, so out of interest let's look at a dog's life from a different perspective. The first question we have to consider is whether the dog is a pack animal. According to ethologist Ray Coppinger, it isn't. He studied a group of feral dogs that lived in and around a village. They had all the means of survival readily available, food from the village dumps, water, and shelter so there was no reason for them to form a pack. They lived semi-solitary lives or in small groups, probably mum and her offspring. We know dogs are social animals, as are we, which is why we can live together under the same roof. So on the basis of Coppinger's research, as we provide our dog with sufficient food, water is always available, they have five star accommodation, exercise is provided and their health cared for, why would they form a pack with us?

Another aspect of the pack theory is that packs tend to be conspecific; in other words they are made up of the same species. Therefore dogs and people cannot form a pack in the true sense of the word; a social group yes, but not a pack. Dogs don't think like us, behave like us, smell like us, or live by the same values as us. Given these facts, shouldn't we be questioning whether our dog in the living room really is looking for opportunities to raise its status?

Before his sad, untimely death, John Fisher was starting to question whether dogs perceived themselves as part of our pack and whether they should live by the pack rules that would supposedly reinforce our position as pack leader. Regrettably, he didn't have the opportunity to put too much in writing about his modified views, although one of the few things he did publish was "...if it's how you want to live with your dog I have news that is going to disappoint a lot of people who have striven to reach Alpha status – it all means diddly squat to your dog."

I think it's worth questioning some of the pack rules we have been told over the years about how to bring up a dog to prevent it from becoming dominant. Bear in mind though that the rules are based on how wolves behave and not how our domestic dogs behave.

Eat something before feeding the dog, because the Alpha always eats first. So we get our new puppy home, call the family together, eat a biscuit, then put the pup's food down. What is the pup really going to understand from that? Not a lot! According to research by David Mech, in a free roaming wolf pack, if the kill is big enough, there is no 'pecking order', and all the wolves would get stuck in. If food were in short supply, the pups' would eat first. The dam has invested 50% of her genes in her puppies and to ensure their survival she would go without food herself. Our behaviour in making the puppy wait may cause it stress or we might encourage it to jump up in order to get its food.

Go through doorways before the pup because subservient wolves stand aside to allow the Alpha wolf to go through small openings first. As canine-to-canine communication is different to canine-to-human communication, is the pup going to understand the message behind this behaviour? We cannot mimic a dog's body language or facial expression so the true reasoning behind this rule will be lost to the dog.

A dog that pulls on the lead is attempting to take charge of the walk, just as a dominant wolf will decide where the pack will go. OK, so a dog walking to the park is pulling on the



lead, as it's so excited at the prospect of having a good run. On the way home, when it's tired, it's walking on a loose lead. Should we then deduce that the dog is being dominant on the way to the park and subservient on the way home? Common sense says not.

The comparison between our dogs' behaviour and wolf behaviour is misleading. Although the dog evolved from the wolf, the wolf has changed very little. We on the other hand have produced breeds of all shapes and sizes. We have breeds with different coat colours, types of coat, length and even no coat at all. We have dogs with different gaits, tail and ear positions. We have bred dogs to help man for guarding, retrieving, herding, pulling, sledges, hunting and just lapdogs. The dog's brain has changed; it's smaller than a wolf's. It has a different conformation, different innate motor patterns, drives and motivations. A dog is not a wolf in dog's clothing; it's simply a dog



There are of course no guarantees that a dog will not develop behavioural problems, but there are steps you can take to minimise the risk. Choose a puppy from a breeder who rears the pups indoors so they can start to become accustomed to household noises and the comings and goings of people to the house. The breeder should also start off the socialisation process, which must continue when it gets to its new home. Teach it house rules so it knows what it can do and what it can't do. If a large, hairy adult dog is not appreciated lying on the sofa, don't encourage it when it's a puppy. Start basic obedience training straight away using motivational reward-based methods, so the pup ends up being a sociable, well behaved dog with manners.

We don't have to be Alpha, dominant or pack leader, and neither does our dog. All we need to be is an owner responsible for guiding our dog, shaping and influencing its behaviour through correct socialisation and training so they can live in harmony with us.

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