

Dominance, pack leader, alpha wolf and the rest of it...

Another attempt at correcting a hopelessly dated perspective

By Laure-Anne Viselé, April 2010

I was having dinner with a friend the other day when she was shocked that I allowed my dog to eat before me. Her vet had told her that this encouraged dogs to 'dominate the family'. Such brazenly unsubstantiated recommendations always scandalise me. I do not perform surgery, so why is it then that so many vets give behaviour advice? The majority of vet schools do not cover behaviour in-depth as a standard module. Canine behaviour therapy is a profession in its own right, requiring specialist qualifications. So next time your vet passes on advice about dominance based on what they heard on the Discovery Channel, please ask them whether they followed a specialist module, and when.

Professionals?

Not only vets, but countless other dog-related professions contribute to perpetuating the dominance myth. The typical old-school dog trainer, whose most formal qualification is that he is 'good with dogs' and has 'twenty years' experience' tends to be all about 'wolf packs' and 'alpha leaders'. But by far the most unprofessional in my view are the telegenic dog trainers who continue to spread popular old wives' tales to a mass TV audience.

The truth about dominance

The vast majority of studies since the mid 1970's corroborate to conclude that:

- [The gray wolf is not a pack animal: it generally lives in a family unit](#) with the parents, this year's pups, and last year's yearlings.
- ['Alpha' wolves do not always eat first, walk in front, or prefer elevated places](#). There is no proven relation between walking order, an

elevated position, or food precedence, with dominance.

- [Dominance fights related to rank-ambition are extremely rare in a wild wolf family](#).
- [A dog is not a wolf](#). Dogs and wolves are physically and behaviourally distinct. Just as psychologists do not systematically interpret humans in relation to chimp behaviour, obsessive wolf-dog analogies are rather limiting. The dog is a domesticated species that needs to be trained and handled in a completely different way to its wild cousin.
- [The dog is not a pack animal](#). The few formal studies of wild and feral dogs show that they group even more loosely than wolves, not even functioning as a family unit. They often only gather briefly around a particular resource before scattering back to their solitary life.

The main bulk of animal behaviour literature consistently testifies to the above, and this for over thirty years. Why is it then that the greatest majority of professionals continue to spread the original dominance misconceptions, causing unnecessary misinterpretation, and often leading to abuse by well-meaning owners? Why is the dominance myth so encroached in the popular mindset?

So why is my dog not listening?

If you are having obedience problems, consider the following options before you assume your dog is purposefully challenging you. 1. Repeating instructions leads to 'learned irrelevance', making them ignore the particular sound bite more with every repetition. 2. Shouting often paralyzes the dog, not exactly a recipe for improving performance. 3. Dogs are terrible generalisers. Just

because they have a command well under control in the kitchen does not mean that they can carry it out in other settings.

One thing is for sure: dogs do not challenge people out of impertinence, or stubbornness, or to 'dominate' them. They do not even understand the concepts. If you are at your wit's ends about a particular problem, why not consult a qualified behaviour therapist to shed some light on the case?

Isn't the anti-dominance approach permissive, creating generations of misbehaved dogs?

Not one bit. The difference between the modern and traditional approaches is that the modern approach seeks to train the dog using fact-based methods rather than old wives' tales. Modern training schools demand obedient dogs every bit as much as the old-school trainers do. The main difference is the method.

Want to find out more?

If you are interested in finding out more about dominance relationships and dog behaviour, you could try the following easy references:

- Jean Donaldson: 'Culture clash'.
- Barry Eaton: 'Dominance. Fact of fiction?'

So, the next few hundred times you hear about a 'dominant dog', you will have to fight the urge to exasperatedly roll your eyes, like the others in the well-informed ranks. Or perhaps you could tactfully bring your interlocutor up to date with more fact-based information?