



ASK THE TRAINER

Being the Alpha...?

Popular concepts of dominance in dogs are problematic because they are based on flawed research into the social structure of wolves. Konrad Lorenz conducted research on the topic in the 1930s. Lorenz, an ethologist, observed artificially assembled groups of wolves in zoos. Stress was high, environmental enrichment was lacking, and the resulting conflict was seen as indicative of a structured social hierarchy. We now know that this conflict was a result of poor animal husbandry, which created stress and short tempers.

This idea of linear social hierarchy morphed into a paradigm of dominance that was applied to our interactions with domestic dogs. Everything, from pulling on leash to jumping up, has been attributed to a “dominant personality.” The Monks of New Skete, a monastery founded in the 1960s and dedicated to dog training, popularized the “alpha roll” as a method of rank reduction and “gaining dominance” over the dog. This consists of holding the dog on her back until she stops fighting the restraint, something that modern behaviour scientists call “learned helplessness.” This technique, as well as other physically and emotionally threatening/painful methods, such as “scruff shakes” and “leash corrections,” were thought to address the root of the problem – dominance. While the Monks eventually retracted the alpha roll, it had already permeated society and is still used today.

As we can see from this short history, training methodology intended for “dominant” dogs has deeply problematic roots, mainly that a) the original

research on wolves was not accurate and b) dogs are not wolves. David Mech, a wildlife research biologist, has been researching wolves in the wild for the past 40 years. His conclusion regarding social hierarchy can be summed up by this quote from his website:

“One of the outdated pieces of information is the concept of the alpha wolf. ‘Alpha’ implies competing with others and becoming top dog by winning a contest or battle. However, most wolves who lead packs achieved their position simply by mating and producing pups, which then became their pack. In other words they are merely breeders, or parents, and that’s all we call them today.”*

Mech describes wolf pack structure as a nuclear family – parents and their offspring – rather than in the terms of conflict and power struggle interpreted by Lorenz.

How does this apply to our dogs and how we relate to them? It doesn’t. Dogs are no more wolves than humans are apes; there is a common ancestor, but each evolved along different routes. Raymond and Lorna Coppinger explain in their book *Dogs: A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior, and Evolution* how “a basic change, a genetic change, has occurred” that lead dogs to become dogs and wolves to become wolves. Specifically, this genetic change came through the sectioning off of the canid population that scavenged near settlements from the canid population that was weary of human activity and attained food through hunting. This divergence in evolutionary path means that the social structure of the modern dog is very different from that of the modern wolf. Research on feral dogs has indicated that they form loose social structures and require social interaction to maintain mental and emotional health, but they are not pack animals – not in Lorenz’s idea of “pack” nor Mech’s.

*<http://www.davemech.org/news.html>

This is a major shift away from the popular view of dogs as pack animals in need of alpha leadership, and it can be difficult to digest upon first exposure. The good thing is that there are alternative, and less adversarial, ways we can relate to and train our dogs. When we take the early research into wolves and the early training texts as current truth, rather than as the archaic texts they are, we do a disservice to both our dogs and ourselves. Megan Herron and her colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania conducted a study on the outcome of aversive training methods. They found a very high correlation between an owner’s use of these confrontational methods and aggression on the part of the dog. Aggression begets aggression. As a species that has the capacity for rational thought and has control of resources, from opening the front door to access to food, we are responsible for finding an alternative to conflict with our dogs. Your dog will thank you.

What now? Below are several resources to get you started:

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour position statement on dominance: <http://www.avsonline.org/avsonline/images/stories/PositionStatements/dominance%20statement.pdf>

Donaldson, Jean. *The Culture Clash: A Revolutionary New Way of Understanding the Relationship Between Humans and Domestic Dogs*. California: James & Kenneth Publishers, 1996.

Coppinger, Raymond and Lorna Coppinger. *Dogs: A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior, and Evolution*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

International Wolf Centre: <http://www.wolf.org/>

Dog Training and Respect: <http://lifeasahuman.com/2011/pets/blunt-force-trauma-canine-reality/>

The Dog Whisperer Controversy: <http://www.4pawsu.com/dogpsychology.htm>

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