

AGGRESSION TOWARD FAMILY MEMBERS

What does “dominance hierarchy” mean?

The concept of dominance hierarchy is used when describing social relationships within groups of animals. Animals that live in groups do so because of the advantages. These include cooperative raising of the young, ease of obtaining food and defense against predators. Since group members offer benefits to each other, it is counter-productive to fight among members and risk injury. Therefore, communication and an understanding of how to share resources is essential. Resources are usually allocated to the strongest members first. Those at the top get things such as food, resting-places, mates and favored possessions preferentially over lower ranking individuals. This has been termed “dominance” hierarchy. The rank of an individual is determined by such factors as genetics, which individual was first on the territory, age, results of competitive encounters, and the competition for resources.



In an encounter where one animal acts “dominant” there needs to be another who acts subordinate or fighting will occur. Subordinate or submissive behaviors in dogs include looking away, or lowered head, body, tail and ears. Extreme submission is shown by crouching down and rolling over and exposing the abdomen. Note that a dominance or pack hierarchy will develop in a group of dogs, but that dominance or leadership refers to the relative relationship of two individuals. Dominance is the quality of a relationship, not of an individual. Whether a dog is subordinate to one dog or person, has little bearing on whether that dog is subordinate to another person or dog.

Often an alternate view is proposed which uses the premise that hierarchies are maintained by the deference of individuals, not by dominant actions.

How does this apply to dogs in human households?

Dogs have evolved from wolves, which live in social groups, so the domestic dog is evolutionarily prepared to live in a group. Each member of this social group develops a relationship with every other member of the group and is either dominant or subordinate to that individual. You may have little control over which dog in your home becomes leader in regards to the other dogs in the home. Most dogs work things out between themselves. For aggression between dogs in the household please see our handout on sibling rivalry.

However, each human in the family must be a leader in his or her relationship with the dog. Yet humans do not communicate with the exactly the same body language, postures, signals and actions as do dogs. Therefore, relationships that develop with humans are not entirely analogous to those that develop between dogs. Human leadership and control must be achieved through actions, training and handling that teach the dog to defer to the owner to receive rewards. A leadership program in dogs teaches the dog that rewards are earned for compliance and obedience, that handling and restraint on the part of the owners are to be tolerated and enjoyed, that rewards cannot be obtained on demand and that the owner initiates favored activities such as play and walks. Confrontational techniques and those that use physical restraint and handling to gain control should be avoided as they may lead to defensive and fearful responses. When a dog has access to all things on demand or when it desires them (food, resting places on furniture and beds, owner attention at any time, territorial displays at doors and windows) the dog may assume it is dominant to the humans due to what it perceives as owner deference. If the dog perceives itself as the “leader” in its relationship with the humans in the home , it may respond with aggressive displays, threats

and actions when challenged for control of its access to critical resources (food, toys, personal space). With the responsibility of being leader these dogs may also be more possessive, protective, and anxious than dogs that have the “comfort” of knowing that another (owner or other dog) is in charge and in control of their pack or household. Keep in mind, a dog may assume a dominant role when it perceives that no one else in the group has taken that position rather than it having a strong desire to “control”.

In many cases of social status or dominance aggression there are aspects of arousal, conflict and anxiety that are key factors in the aggression. When dogs challenge their owners to maintain a favored resource (e.g. sleeping area, toy, or attention of a family member) the problem may be aggravated by the owner’s reaction (e.g. withdrawal that reinforces the behavior or threats, punishment, and anxiety which increases the dog’s fear, defensiveness, and anxiety) and over time learns that aggressive behavior results in a successful outcome for the dog.



How can I prevent my dog from becoming in control?

It is important that owners set themselves up as leaders very early in their relationship with their dog. Most dogs readily obey but some require a fair amount of patience and consistency since they may be genetically more likely to challenge and resist. Ask for our handouts on basic training and taking charge. Becoming the leader does not imply harshness or punishment, but control of resources and behavior. This is accomplished with training and supervision. The individual temperament and genetic

predisposition of the puppy will determine the methods needed by the owner to become the leader. Equally important is to recognize deference when it occurs. When your dog looks away, lowers its head or avoids, especially when you are reprimanding it, this is deference. From the dog’s perspective the encounter is over and if the human persists, the dog may respond with fear and defensive behaviors. Remember, just because the dog defers once does not mean he will in another setting. Each context is separate and the dogs’ desire for the resource in question figures into the response.

How can I determine if my dog is exhibiting social status aggression?

The beginning signs of social status or dominance aggression are usually subtle. Dogs mostly use facial expressions and body postures to signal intent. A low body and wagging tail show friendly approach; a high wagging tail, eye contact and perhaps teeth showing could be an assertive approach. Challenges between owner and pet usually begin with prolonged eye contact and maybe growling and/or snarling (lifting of the lip exposing teeth usually without noise) over resources such as food, resting places, moving the dog and perhaps handling the body. If the owner sometimes acquiesces but at other times continues the “challenge” the relationship may be unclear and the dog may escalate the aggression to snapping, lunging and biting. It will be necessary to determine the context of the aggression such as certain types of petting or handling, approaching when the dog is resting or sleeping, touching the food or toys, discipline or scolding the dog, ability to handle the body, or stepping over the dog. These aggressive displays may not occur in every situation, only those where the dog feels that its authority is being challenged.

Aggressions in these contexts are not the only criteria for determining if a dog is behaving in a dominantly aggressive manner. The body posture of the dog during the encounter is very important.

Dominant dogs will usually have eye contact, may be “stiff”, or tense and standing tall with their tail usually up. Fearful dogs can show aggression in the same contexts as dominantly aggressive dogs, but their body posture will be more consistent with fear and would include lowered head and body, tail tucked and perhaps averted eyes. It is also possible to have multiple motivations. Many dogs are showing aggression in the above mentioned contexts are anxious and fearful. Not all social status aggressive dogs behave the same and a description of what the dog looks like, how they responded to challenges and where they occur and with whom are important pieces of information to obtain before making a diagnosis. Additionally, a dog may only show aggression in limited contexts, say food guarding only, and in such case is probably not motivated by dominance but food guarding behavior. Within a family a dog may exhibit social status aggressive behavior to some family members and be subordinate and non-aggressive to others.

How the dog looks during these encounters is important but more so is how the dog behaved during the first initial aggressive episodes. It is possible for a dog to growl at their owner because of fear and if the owner backs away the pet learns that aggression works. Over time, with repetition of the same scenario the dog learns that aggression results in a favorable outcome. This may result in a dog that acts confident rather than fearful, but underlying anxiety and fear may be the cause of the aggression. This would result in a different diagnosis, rather than social status aggression this dog may be exhibiting fear or conflict aggression.

What should I do if I believe that my dog is acting in a “dominant” manner and/or exhibiting dominance motivated or social status aggression?

All aggressive challenges should be taken seriously. Dogs are capable of hurting and inflicting a great deal of damage with their bites. Physically confronting a dog that is acting in an aggressive manner can result in the escalation of the aggression and subsequent injury to humans. Dogs who have been controlling their environment and human housemates for some time will not easily relinquish the “leader” role. Physical challenges could also lead to fearful and defensive aggression.

Therefore it is important to be able to accurately determine how the dog will behave. All aggressive and potentially aggressive situations should be identified and avoided. The situations and responses are not always predictable. At no time should family members attempt to “out muscle” the dog and force it to obey. This can result in serious human injury.

First, identify all situations that might lead to aggression and prevent access to these circumstances (by caging or confinement or environmental manipulation) or otherwise control the dog when a confrontational situation might arise. Although the long-term goal would be to reduce or eliminate the potential for aggression in these situations, each new episode could lead to injury and further aggravation of the problem. A head collar and lead is a good way to control the dog inside the home while a muzzle may be even more effective at preventing bites.

Second, identify and correct those situations where the dog may not be aggressive but is asserting its control. Dogs should not be allowed into areas or onto furniture where they might be possessive, protective or unwilling to obey. In principle your dog should not have resting and sleeping areas such as your bed or your furniture since these are places where people are, and therefore a potential location for an encounter and injury. Dogs should sleep on their own mat or in their own area and be under constant supervision when they are out of these areas and around family members. In addition, dogs that lead or pull the owners through doors or on walks, must be taught to heel and follow. During training and when giving commands insure that your dog always obeys. Leave a leash and head halter attached to insure success. Mouthing, play biting and tug of war games should be avoided. While they might not increase aggression they do allow the dog to learn how to use its mouth to control outcomes. .

Third, withdraw all privileges and rewards. Affection, attention, praise, food, treats, play and toys are rewards and must be earned. When rewards are given on demand, the dog is controlling the owner, and the owner is rewarding the domineering or demanding behavior. In order to retrain these dogs and show that the owner is in control the dog needs to learn that these resources will only be given when they are earned for obedient and subordinate actions in the presence of the owners. Rewards also take on their highest degree of motivation when they have been withheld. Just as it would be inappropriate to try and train a dog with a piece of food immediately following a meal, it is of little value to try and use affection or play as a reward for a dog that receives play or attention on demand. Therefore if a dog seeks any form of attention, affection, play, or food, the dog must be ignored so that it cannot achieve control over these resources.

Fourth, reward-based obedience training is essential for all dogs, but especially those that are disobedient or showing social status aggressiveness. Begin in safe and successful environments with rewards given for compliance. Once successful, these commands should be practiced in a variety of environments and with all family members. Again use a leash and head halter to ensure success, while controlling the head and mouth.

Fifth, be in “control”. Do this by controlling the resources that the dog wants and then require the dog to “earn” them. Usually this means that before the dog gets what it wants, the dog is asked to come, sit, stay or “go to its mat.” For example, the dog can be taught that in order to receive food, petting, play, or walks it must first respond to one of these commands. Because the dog wants something it is more likely to comply. Some dogs will not sit when asked. If they do not obey, they do not get what they want. Should the dog come to you to demand attention, affection, play, or food, ignore it. The rewards must be only given when your dog responds to one of your commands. Commands should be given calmly, but firmly and you should be willing to walk away if the dog does not comply. It is essential to only give the command one time. Repetition of the command allows the dog to decide when to comply. The goal is to demand immediate and prompt compliance or the dog does not receive the resource it desires.



What can be done if my dog refuses to obey my commands?

It is essential that the owner avoid any confrontation or situation that might lead to injury or where the owner may not be able to safely gain control. Each time your dog fails to comply, it reinforces his or her control over you. For these dogs you can gain more immediate control if the dog is fitted with a remote leash and head halter, that can then be used to take the dog for walks and is left attached when the dog is indoors and the owner is at home (except for bedtime). Each time the dog is given a command that is not obeyed the leash and head halter can be used to get the desired response. Although the head halter and remote leash is an excellent means of ensuring success and physical control, you have not succeeded until the dog will respond to the verbal commands, without the need for leash pulls and halter management. In other words if the dog responds to the command it is rewarded, but if it does not obey, you must make it obey using the leash and halter (never punishment), and repeat the exercise until the dog responds to the verbal command alone. Another important advantage of the head halter is that it provides for safe control. By pulling forward and upward with a leash, the mouth can be closed, the dog can be looked in the eyes, and released and rewarded for subordinate or obedient responses. A remote leash and basket muzzle can

also be used to ensure safety but they do provide the same degree of head and muzzle control as a long lead and head collar.

For some dogs, these steps will help decrease the aggressive behavior. Many dogs like routine and control and have only assumed control because no one else in the household was in the leader position. However, do not expect a cure because some dogs with social status aggression may continually attempt to control situations and resources and can cause injury if confronted. Social status aggression that is long standing has already resulted in owner injury, and multiple challenges should be discussed with a behavior consultant to determine if and how the problem can be corrected safely. Although there are no drugs that specifically reduce dominance or help the owners to attain leadership, drug therapy may be useful in some cases as an aid to behavior therapy.