
DEBUNKING DOMINANCE

It's not based on science. Really.

The notion of dominance in dogs stems from a misunderstanding of wolf pack research that was then applied to pet dogs. Unfortunately, the notion stuck. It was always likely to stick, because we humans organize ourselves in hierarchies, so the idea seems utterly plausible to us. But even if the dominance principle applied to wolves—research now definitively shows it doesn't—pet dogs are no more wolves than we are chimpanzees.

It's not helpful.

The term dominance is a label, not a solution. What's more, it sets up a conflict. If I believe my dog to be dominant it follows that I must make him submit to me. This often results in an ongoing battle of will that is unpleasant for both of us.

A much more useful approach is to leave out labels altogether and simply describe what your dog is doing, decide what you want him to do instead, and then make a plan to help him change his behavior.

It's a non-issue.

What is important is the good relationship between you and your dog and getting training results that allow you to live harmoniously together. Good training sets the human and the dog up to both get what they want so everyone is happy. For example:

- Reward behaviors you like. That will make them happen more often.
- Ignore behaviors or remove rewards for behaviors you don't like. That will make them happen less often.
- Practice nothing for free. Ask your dog to sit for doors to be opened, balls to be thrown, leashes to come off at the park, etc. This makes asking politely your dog's main strategy for getting what he wants, instead of using pushy, obnoxious behavior.

With methods like these, everyone wins. You get a happy, well-behaved dog and your dog gets to chase balls, sniff other dogs, and eat treats, all of which are high on his list of priorities.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) recommends that veterinarians not refer clients to trainers or behavior consultants who subscribe to dominance theories and confrontational training, but instead refer clients only to trainers who follow the scientifically based guidelines of positive reinforcement, classical and operant conditioning, desensitization, and counter-conditioning.