



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Dealing with a Dominant Dog

FOR SOME PEOPLE, the phrase “top dog” isn’t just a saying. It actually describes their dogs. If you’ve got a dog who likes to boss you (or others) around, chances are you’ve got a dominance aggression problem in your household—a problem that could endanger you, your family, and others.

Most dogs assume a neutral or submissive role toward people, but some dogs will challenge their owners for dominance. A dominant dog may stare, bark, growl, snap, or even bite when you give him a command or ask him to give up a toy, treat, or resting place. Sometimes even hugging, petting, or grooming can be interpreted as gestures of dominance and, therefore, provoke a growl or snap—and this is true even though your dog may still be very affectionate and often solicit petting and attention from you.

To understand why your dog behaves in these ways, it’s important to know some things about canine social systems. Animals who live in social groups, including wolves and domestic dogs, establish a social structure called a dominance hierarchy within their group. This hierarchy serves to maintain order, reduce conflict, and promote cooperation among group members. A position within the dominance hierarchy is established by each member of the group, based on the outcomes of interactions between themselves and the other pack members. The more dominant animals can control access to valued items such as food, den sites, and mates. For domestic dogs, valued items might be food, toys, sleeping or resting places, and attention from their owners.

For your home to be a safe and happy place for pets and people, it’s best that the humans in the household assume the highest positions in the dominance hierarchy, particularly with dominant dogs.

Is Your Dog Dominant?

You may have a dominance issue with your dog if he:

- Resists obeying well-known commands.
- Won’t move out of your way when required.
- Nudges your hand, mouths your arm, or insists on being petted or played with—in other words, he “orders” you to obey.
- Defends food, toys, or other objects from you.
- Growls or bares teeth under any circumstances.
- Resists handling by you, the veterinarian, or the groomer.
- Gets up on furniture without permission and won’t get down.
- Snaps at you.

What to Do If You Recognize Signs of Dominance in Your Dog

If you recognize the beginning signs of dominance aggression in your dog, consult an animal-behavior specialist immediately. Avoid using any form of physical punishment on your dog. Getting physical with a dominant dog may cause the dog to intensify his aggression, posing the risk of injury to you.

If your dog has shown signs of dominance aggression, take the following precautions to ensure the safety of your family and others who may encounter your dog:

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- Avoid situations that bring out the aggressive behavior.
- Back off and use “happy talk” to relieve the intensity of situations in which your dog acts aggressively.
- Supervise, confine, or restrict your dog’s activities as necessary, especially when children or other pets are present.
- Use a head halter or muzzle to help control your dog when you’re outdoors. Brand names of head halters include Gentle Leader, Promise Collar, or Halti.
- When you’re indoors with your dog, control access to parts of the home by using baby gates or by crating your dog. You can also use a cage-type muzzle, head halter, or leash for control purposes—but do so only when you can closely supervise your dog.

Dominance aggression problems are unlikely to go away without your taking steps to resolve them. Because dominant-aggressive dogs can be potentially dangerous, treatment of dominance aggression problems should always be supervised by an animal-behavior specialist.

Becoming the Leader of the Pack

Use the following techniques—none of which requires a physical confrontation with your dog—to help you gain some control over your dog and establish yourself as the “pack leader”:

- Spay or neuter your dog to reduce hormonal contributions to aggression. Understand that after a mature animal has been spayed or neutered, it may take time for those hormones to clear from the body. In some cases, long-standing behavior patterns may continue even after the hormones or other causes no longer exist.
- Use a training technique called “Nothing in Life Is Free” to establish your leadership in a safe, nonconfrontational way. This technique requires your dog to “work” for everything he gets from you. Have your dog obey at least one command (such as “sit”) before you pet him, give him dinner, put on his leash, or throw him a toy. If your dog doesn’t know any commands or doesn’t perform them reliably, you’ll first have to teach him, using positive reinforcement techniques, and practice with him daily.

Related topics at www.petsforlife.org

- How to Use a Head Halter
- Nothing in Life Is Free: A Training Technique for Dogs
- Positive Reinforcement: Training Your Dog (or Cat!) with Treats and Praise

(For complete guidance on this technique, see “Nothing in Life Is Free: A Training Technique for Dogs.”) You may need to seek professional help if, after two or three weeks of working on a command, your dog does not obey each time you ask.

- Don’t feed your dog food from the table and don’t allow begging.
- Don’t play “tug-of-war,” wrestle, or play roughly with your dog.
- Ignore barking and jumping up.
- Don’t allow your dog on the furniture or your bed unless invited to do so by you, because this is a privilege reserved for leaders. If your dog growls or snaps when you try to remove him from the furniture, use a treat to lure him off. Otherwise, try to limit his access to your bed or furniture by using baby gates or a crate or by closing doors.
- Always remember to reward appropriate behavior.
- Consult your veterinarian about acupuncture, massage therapy, or drug therapy. Your veterinarian may prescribe the temporary use of medication to be used in conjunction with behavior modification.
- Consider enrolling your dog in a training class. This may help establish a relationship between you and your dog in which you give commands and he obeys them. Be sure to choose a trainer who uses positive reinforcement methods. Understand that obedience classes alone won’t necessarily prevent or reduce dominance aggression.

A Note about Children and Dogs

From your dog’s point of view, children, too, have a place in the dominance hierarchy. Because children are smaller and get down on the dog’s level to play, dogs often consider them to be playmates rather than superiors. Small children and dogs should never be left alone together without adult supervision. Older children should be taught how to play and interact appropriately and safely with dogs. Under no circumstances, however, should a child be left alone with a dog who has displayed signs of aggression.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. ©2000 Dumb Friends League and ©2003 The HSUS. All rights reserved.

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