



Produced by the
Australian Veterinary Behaviour Interest Group
a special interest group of the
Australian Veterinary Association



DEBUNKING DOMINANCE IN DOGS



Everyone has probably heard of a dog being described as dominant; the pushy dog who tries to run the household.

But what exactly is dominance and can there be a truly dominant dog? It's time to catch up with the latest and learn that using the **D word can be Drastically Detrimental!**

What is dominance?

It is not accurate to describe a dog as having a dominant personality. The word should only ever be used to describe a single interaction between two individuals competing for a resource such as a piece of food or a toy. One dog will usually give up the contest and leave the resource for the other. In that situation, the individual who wins is dominant.

Different resources motivate different dogs at different times. This means the relationship can change – just like you might argue with your partner occasionally about what channel on TV to watch, but at other times be quite happy to let them watch their choice.

How did we get so mixed up?

From the 1940s to the 1980s, studies of captive wolf packs suggested they used aggression to establish a pecking order, a rank, with the dominant wolf called the alpha dog, or top dog. As dogs descended from wolves it was assumed that the social behaviour of dogs followed these rules. However, these studies were flawed. We now know that wolves in the wild rarely show aggression within their family pack.

Your dog is not a wolf, nor is it a human

Our domestic dogs and wolves evolved from a common ancestor more than 15,000 years ago and do retain some similarities. However, dogs have also developed some major behavioural and physical differences to become the valued friends they are today; they play throughout their lives, are usually friendly to unfamiliar dogs and other species and can read human body language. They even look to us to solve their problems. Through sharing our homes and lives, we have learnt to communicate remarkably well considering we speak different languages and have a completely different sensory perception of the world. It is in their interests that we communicate with dogs in a way that gives them the best possible chance of understanding us.

So, why is my dog behaving this way?

If your dog is growling, baring its teeth or snapping at you or others, it is not because they're trying to dominate you. Often anxiety and insecurity are the primary contributors to aggressive behaviour. Dogs with medical conditions or those in pain are also more likely to be irritable or react defensively.

A lot of unwanted behaviour is actually normal behaviour for dogs, they may just not have been taught what we expect from them or want them to do.

In certain situations involving conflict, a dog may show controlling behaviour. For example, your dog may growl if another animal approaches their food bowl, or if multiple dogs are trying to squeeze through a doorway together.

If your dog growls at you while its on the couch and has you all tip-toeing around, it may be that they are feeling anxious that you're going to force them off or punish them for being there.

Do I need to show them who's the boss?

Anyone with a 'pushy', 'rude' or 'demanding' dog has probably been told at some stage to 'show them who's boss' or to 'make them submit'. The advice usually involves physically punishing the dog by forcing it onto its side (the 'alpha roll'), or to hold eye contact whilst growling at the dog. These confrontational techniques are a bad idea. They are very risky and may result in escalation of aggression.

Punishment will not calm an agitated dog. Punishment will increase both fear and excitability, and a growl may then escalate into a bite. Punishing your dog for growling may also inadvertently teach it to suppress the warning growl and bite with no warning.

If your dog is anxious, punishment will make the anxiety worse. Punishment also fails to teach your dog how you want it to behave, and can ruin your dog's trust in you and other people.

What to do

- 1. Keep safe.** If your dog is showing aggression to you by growling, showing its teeth or snapping, do not confront it. Avoid or prevent the situation until you have consulted with someone qualified to advise you on safe strategies to help you and your dog.
- 2. Be proactive, not reactive.** All dogs need predictability in their life and need to be taught how you want them to behave. You need to establish clear rules and be consistent in rewarding desirable behaviour. The golden rule is to reward the behaviour you do want and ignore or redirect the behaviour you don't want. Remember, the only way to do this is to find the right way to communicate with your dog so it is happy to listen to you!
- 3. Get the right help.** The best place to start is to ask for advice from your veterinarian. Your vet can check for any contributing medical problems and if necessary will refer you to a veterinary behaviour specialist, qualified veterinary behaviourist or a qualified trainer. You can also contact the Australian Veterinary Behaviour Interest Group (AVBIG) at avbigsecretary@gmail.com for advice. We recommend seeking expert help to ensure you are getting the best advice for the happiest possible outcome for you and your pet.

