

Dealing with a Dominant Dog

For some people, the phrase “Top Dog” isn’t just a saying. If your dog likes to be the boss, barking orders to you or others, you may have a dominance/aggression issue on your hands; one that could endanger you, your family and others.

Most dogs assume a neutral or submissive role towards people, but others will challenge 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. In some cases, hugging, petting or grooming can be interpreted as gestures of dominance provoking a growl or snap. This may be true despite your dog being very affectionate and often soliciting petting and other 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 dominance hierarchy within their groups. 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 the 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, its best that the humans in the household assume the highest positions in the dominance hierarchy, particularly with dominant dogs.

Table of Contents:

1. Is your Dog Dominant?
2. What to Do If You Recognize Signs of Dominance in Your Dog?
3. Becoming the Leader of the Pack?
4. A Note about Children and Dogs



55 Southwest Dr. S.W
Medicine Hat, AB
T1A 8E8

Call us: (403)526-7722

Fax us: (403)504-5740

Email us:

contact@medhatspca.ca

Follow us:

Facebook @MHSPCA

Instagram @MHSPCA

Section 1: 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 play
- Defends food, toys or other objects from you
- Growls or bares teeth under any circumstances
- Resists handling by you, the veterinarian or groomer
- Gets up on furniture without permission and refuses to get down
- Snaps at you or others

Section 2: 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 behavioral 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 a risk of injury to you or others.

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:

- Avoid situations that bring out the aggressive behavior
- Back off and use "Happy Talk" to relieve the intensity of situations 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 are outdoors. There are many good brands of quality products such as Gentle Leader, Promise Collar or Halti.
- When indoors with your dog, control access to parts of the home by using baby gates or 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 problems are unlikely to go away without intentional steps being taken to resolve them. Because dominant-aggressive dogs can be potentially dangerous, treatment should always be supported by Animal Behavior Specialists.

Section 3: Becoming the Leader of the Pack

The following techniques can be used to help gain control of your dog and establish yourself as the leader of the pack. Please note, none of the techniques require a physical confrontation with your dog:

- 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.
- A training technique called “Nothing in Life is Free” can be used by owners to establish your leadership in a safe, non-confrontational way. This technique requires dogs to “work” for everything he receives from their owners. Have your dog obey at least one command (such as “sit”) before he is petted, receives dinner, gets put on a leash, or gets a toy. If your dog doesn’t know any commands or doesn’t perform them reliably, you will first have to teach him, using positive reinforcement techniques, and working on and practice with him daily. 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.
- Do not feed your dog food from the table or allow him to beg.
- Do not 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 o lure him off. Otherwise, try to limit his access to your bed or furniture by using baby gates or closing doors.
- Always 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 mediation.
- Consider enrolling your dog in a training class. This may help establish a relationship between you and your dog in which you make commands and he obeys them. Be sure to choose a trainer who uses positive reinforcement methods. Understand that obedience classes alone will not necessarily prevent or reduce dominance aggression behaviors.

Section 4: About Children & Dogs

From your dog’s point of view, children also have a position in the dominance hierarchy. Because they are smaller and get on the same level as dogs to play, children are often considered to be playmates by dogs, 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, should any child be left with a dog who has displayed sign of aggression.

**adopted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. C 2000 Dumb Friends League and C 2003 the HSUS. All Rights reserved. |*