



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Dominance Based Training

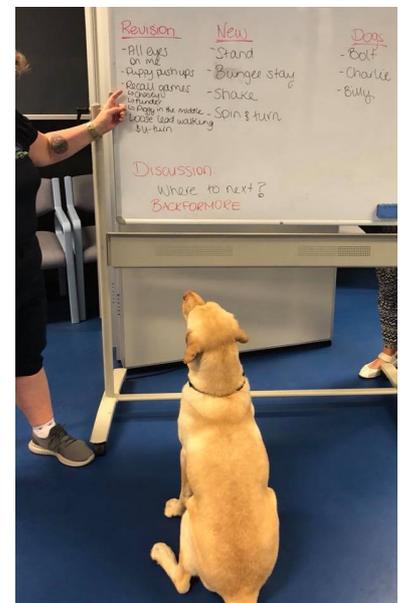
Dictators VS Benevolent Leaders

There are many theories and methods of pet dog training used around the world. Some have gained more popularity than others due to their presence in the media on TV and online. But does the fact that a theory or method is popular mean that it is effective in creating behavioural changes? And, more importantly, do the results justify the means?

The alpha-wolf concept

Some popular theories are often referred to as 'Dominance' or 'Pack Structure' theories. These theories are based on the premise that dogs have evolved from wolves and that we should take our dog training tips from how wolves 'train' each other. The methods and 'rules' that these training theories are based on come from observations of wolf packs outside of their natural setting.

One of the major contributors to the research that has led to the 'Alpha Dog' and 'Dominance' theories is L. David Mech, Ph.D. In the words of Mech himself in an article written in 2008 for www.wolf.org; 'Finally in the late 1990s, after I had lived with a wild wolf pack ... witnessing firsthand the interactions among parent wolves and their offspring, I decided to correct this misinformation. By then, however, both the lay public and most biologists had fully adopted the alpha concept and terminology.' Mech goes on to say 'it has been said that it generally takes about 20 years for new science to fully seep down to general acceptance... Such seems to be proving true with the alpha-wolf concept.'



Reducing the rank of the dog

The misinterpretations of a "pack structure" theory (the idea that one dog is on top, then there's a number two, then a number three...) lead to many popular misconceptions in dog training. One of the main misconceptions is that most unwanted canine behaviours are as a result of the dog attempting to 'dominate' the humans in the family.

This then lead to training concepts focused on reducing the rank of the dog. Rank reducing programs suggest that the owners put in place certain rules in order to reduce the 'rank' of the dog. Some of these rules include people eating before dogs, people walking through doorways first, not allowing dogs on furniture such as couches and beds, not playing games of tug-of-war, not letting the dog walk in front of you and most importantly if the dog shows any signs of ignorance or aggression this must be met with greater force and aggression such as the well-known 'Alpha Roll' (in which the dog is forced on its side until it 'submits'). These techniques are not recommended by leading dog behaviourists, or the APDTA (Association of Pet Dog Trainers Australia).

House rules



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Rank reducing programs as described above are misleading. For example, if food is scarce, a wild wolf or dog pack will often allow the pups to eat first. This is important to the survival of the next generation, and indeed the species, and has nothing to do with dominance. Dogs are opportunistic creatures and can often be very enthusiastic about meal times. Because of this it may be in everyone's best interest to teach the dog some pre-mealtime behaviours such as sit quietly while I get your food ready and waiting until I put the bowl down before eating. Better yet, use the dogs' natural hunting and scavenging instincts and make them work for their food by providing a food dispensing toy or a treasure hunt around the yard.

Often a 'leader' wolf or dog will lead from the middle, not from in front. However, teaching your dog to sit and wait as you open the door can reduce unwanted behaviours born out of enthusiasm, such as scratching and barking at the door to get outside. If your dog is sitting politely at the door as you open it you can see if the neighbour's cat is sitting in your front yard before your dog does. Teaching dogs to walk on a loose lead makes a walk a lot nicer for you and your dog and it helps reduce unwanted arousal and inappropriate body language towards other dogs. If your dog is pulling on the lead or trying to walk in front of you, it does not mean they are trying to "dominate you".

Another example is if you choose to allow your dogs on the couch or bed, that's your choice, but it is a good idea to give them an 'on' and 'off' cue. The couch and bed are very comfortable resources, and it is important to let your dog know that is in their best interest to share this valuable resource with everyone.

Fighting fire with fire - never a good idea

Possibly the most dangerous element in a rank reducing program is that of meeting any perceived ignorance or aggression from the dog with greater force. This can have many risks for both the dog and the handler. In fact, television trainers that use these types of training methods often have a 'Do not try this at home!' disclaimer for this very reason. People with little or no training in dog behaviour often miss or misread what, to the trained eye, are very clear communications from the dog to say that it is uncomfortable, stressed and/or feeling threatened in a situation.

A common example is a dog looking away from the handler during a training session. This often means that the handler is making the dog feel uncomfortable, either by setting too difficult a task or by using overbearing vocal or body language. This looking away is then misinterpreted as the dog defying, being stubborn, ignoring or trying to dominate the handler. The rank reducing method often used to deal with this situation is to force the dog to face the trainer. This can lead to a downward spiral of the dog feeling more uncomfortable, trying to get out of the situation and the handler using increasingly more aggressive methods to 'teach the dog who is boss'. This usually ends in one of three results: 'learned helplessness' where the dog gives up trying to communicate resulting in the hangdog expression of what is sometimes considered to be an 'obedient' dog; second, the dog may bite the handler, who may in turn answer with greater aggression (or puts the dog to sleep); or, third, the dog is so overwhelmed by the situation that neither 'fight', 'flight', or 'freeze' are effective and the dog enters the dissociative state of 'shutdown' often mistaken, by some, as calmness or submission.

The way forward using science

The other side of the coin is what is referred to as 'Positive Reinforcement', 'Learning Theory', 'Scientific' or 'New' theories or methods of dog training.

These methods are based on the scientifically recognised work of Ivan Pavlov and B.F Skinner: classical and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning creates a positive association with something that may have



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meant nothing to the dog or that the dog previously didn't like. Hearing the music of the ice-cream truck makes children excited, because they've associated ice-cream with the music. Operant conditioning predicts that an animal is more likely to repeat a behaviour that it has been rewarded for in the past. We hear an alarm, we get dressed and we go to work. Why? Because we enjoy our job and/or we get paid well enough to do it. Poker machines also work on this principle.

These training methods were introduced to pet dog owners by people like Dr. Ian Dunbar and Karen Pryor in the early 1980s. These methods do not recommend the use of any aversive training techniques and echo scientific research that suggests that playing the 'Alpha Role' when working with dogs is an outdated and superseded misrepresentation of humans' relationship with dogs. Dunbar says of playing the 'Alpha Role' with pet dogs; 'Learning from wolves to interact with pet dogs makes about as much sense as, 'I want to improve my parenting -- let's see how the chimps do it!'

Be a benevolent leader

Positive reinforcement based training awards the dog owner with the rank of Benevolent Leader not Dictator. Owners decide on what house rules they wish to set and take responsibility to train their dogs to not only do what they're told but want to do what they're told. Through teaching and rewarding the dog for expressing behaviours that the handler wants the dog to perform, the dog develops an understanding of what is expected and an enthusiasm for doing appropriate behaviours.

It is important that you understand what is and isn't rewarding for a dog. For example: if a dog jumps up on a person and the person grabs the dog by its jowls, pushes it to the ground and shouts 'Bad dog, DOWN!', depending on the dog's preferences of course, the dog could quite easily think 'yippee, you looked at me, and touched me and spoke to me!' This has given the dog three rewards for an undesired behaviour and with that increased the likelihood of that jumping behaviour being repeated. However if the dog was first taught to sit and then taught that sitting politely in front of people makes the human look at them, touch them and talk to them, then the dog is much more likely to sit in front of people when it meets them rather than jumping up.

Reward based training creates a stronger bond between the handler and the dog. Instead of having a dog that does what it's told for fear of being bullied, reward based trainers have dogs that enthusiastically carry out their requests. If the dog doesn't do what, when and how it's told; reward based trainers take responsibility for this and see it as an opportunity for more training and not some kind of attempt of the dog to undermine their leadership.

The fact is that there is nothing 'New' about this method of training at all: wolf chases rabbit, wolf catches rabbit, wolf eats rabbit. Now, that's some serious positive reinforcement!

RSPCA Queensland's Animal Training and Behaviour Centre does not use nor recommend any training methods that breach the internationally recognised Five Freedoms for Animals:

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst
 2. Freedom from Discomfort
 3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease
 4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour
 5. Freedom from Fear and Distress
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For more information on this subject we recommend:

www.clickertraining.com

www.dogwise.com

www.dogstardaily.com

How Dogs Learn - Mary Burch

Don't Shoot the Dog - Karyn Pryor

Dominance in Dogs: Fact or Fiction? - Barry Eaton

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