

Helping Pet Owners Change Pet Behaviors

An Overview of the Science

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KEYWORDS

• Dominance • Learning • Punishment • Reinforcement • Trainer

KEY POINTS

- The relationship between pet and owner has changed significantly in recent years.
- The perception of pets as thinking, feeling beings has allowed a transition in training and care from one of poor and inadequate behavioral welfare to an approach that may allow seeing the full potential of patients.
- Veterinary professionals need to develop a solid understanding of evidence-based techniques for training and behavior modification.
- Veterinary professionals also need to begin to work with trainers and other behavior professionals who have the same mindset and goals and refer to a qualified professional if they do not have adequate knowledge.

DOMINANCE IN WOLVES AND DOGS: MYTH OR FACT?

For many years, the predominant approach to living with and training dogs (*Canis familiaris*) has been steeped in the theory of dominance and pack leadership. A dog who did not want to have his nails trimmed or a dog who would not come when called was labeled “dominant.” This approach initially trickled out of the application of information gathered from the wolf (*Canis lupus*) community. Wolf packs were thought to maintain stability through an “alpha pair” (an alpha male and an alpha female), who were responsible for breeding and leadership of the group. Schenkel¹ initially suggested that the social relationship of the wolf was a yearly cyclic phenomenon. It was during this initial period that the pack became a closed society, the core of which involved the alpha pair. This theory maintained that other individuals in the pack would continuously vie for leadership but would be kept in their subordinate position by the higher-ranking individuals.^{1,2} Schenkel developed his theory from observations of unrelated wolves in captivity at the Basel Zoological Garden, where up to 10 wolves were

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maintained in a confined area. During his observation of this group, violent rivalries were observed. This information was then applied and compared with domestic dogs that were believed the most “primitive” (Eskimo dogs and street dogs). Schenkel’s observation of these dog groups suggested that the group activity was not seasonal but instead remained static throughout the year.

For many years, the approach to group dynamics of both wolves and dogs was based on these assumptions. It was later determined that the artificial environment of a captive group of wolves was not representative of the natural assemblage of wolves. A family of wolves is composed of a breeding pair and their juvenile offspring from the previous 1 year to 3 years, and a group of wolves may sometimes include more than 1 family. As the young wolves mature, they typically begin to disperse between the ages of 1 and 2, with few remaining past the age of 3 years.³ The contrast of this fluid family unit to the artificial captive pack that is required to live in close proximity for many years was stark. An analogy has been made by Mech^{3,4} that comparing wolves in captivity with natural packs is equivalent to studying human family dynamics with information from humans in refugee camps.

Unfortunately, this distorted information was applied to the management of domestic dogs as well as some other species. This perspective was used to view both the relationship between pets and owners and between pets living in the same home. In the popular press, professional approach, and in the home, the usage of dominance theory became an ingrained and acceptable approach for all behavioral issues. The approach to treat a canine behavioral problem became “be a pack leader” or the “alpha” in the home.

More recently, observation of natural wolf packs has demonstrated that the group is not a rigid, force-based dominance hierarchy as originally believed. Posturing is evident between dogs during social interactions, consistent with dominant and submissive gestures. But it is generally thought that both active and passive submissive interactions help promote friendly interactions and decrease conflict.^{1,3,5} Additionally, the exchanges of agonistic and submissive signaling have not been correlated with dominance, even in wolves.⁶ The current view more closely adheres to the theory that the wolf pack is a family unit with the adult breeding parents guiding the group activities; yet each wolf is an individual with flexibility consistent with that found in humans.

The remaining question is whether information from natural and/or captive wolf packs can be applied to the domesticated dog. Evidence that domesticated dogs are significantly different from wolves, in their domestication as well as in social cognition, has further removed probable comparisons between wolves and dogs.^{7–9} Although multiple examples of how dogs differ from wolves exist, a common life example of the significant differences between wolves and dogs can be demonstrated by evaluation of barking behaviors. Although both dogs and wolves bark, the threshold for barking is lower in dogs, the patterns have more variability in dogs, and dogs bark in various social situations. Studies have indicated that humans’ selection over time has altered some traits of individual dogs. Often selection for a particular trait has been strengthened in a breed over time, sometimes increasing or decreasing a behavior that is less compatible with the home environment.

Historical use of the term, *dominant*, in describing an individual animal has led pet owners and trainers alike to react and interact with their pets in a particular way. The thought that dominance is a personality trait of individual dogs, and that a dog’s goal is to achieve resource control, has allowed humans to react in such a way to adjust the relationship through physical coerciveness. Research has shown that there is no

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