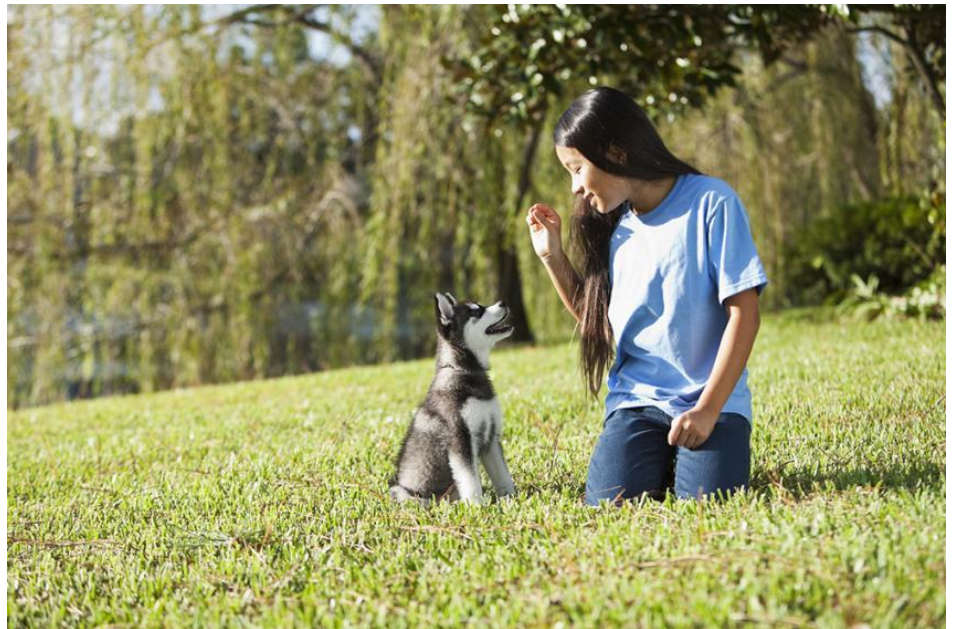


The Myth of Dominance in Dog Training

The dictionary defines “dominance” as the fact or state of being dominant. In sociology, it means to hold a controlling, prevailing, or powerful position, especially in a social hierarchy. In terms of dog training, traditional methods have used force and equipment in an attempt to gain dominance over dogs. Recently, however, there has been a big shift from these training methods to training based in positive reinforcement and learning to appropriately communicate with our dogs.



Then vs now

The first time dominance in dogs was theorized, describing the basic difference between dominance and submission in dogs, was in Konrad Lorenz' book *King Solomon's Ring* (1949). Lorenz, who was a Nobel Prize-winning ethologist and animal behaviourist, based the idea on observations of his own dogs. Dominance in dogs was further theorized and methods were developed based on a study done on the relationship between non-familial wolves in captivity by Robert Shenke. David L. Mech also perpetuated the same theory in his 1970 book *The Wolf*. However, in the years since, Mech began studying wolves in the wild and now actively states that his original research was incorrect and outdated based on his own, as well as other, more current science and ethology.

We now know that domesticated dogs do not, in fact, form relationships in the same way as wolves. Even when wild dogs form groups, they are not tightly knit family groups like those of wolf packs. Wolf packs generally consist of a breeding pair and their offspring. In comparison, domestic dogs tend to form groups with fluid social hierarchies, meaning more than one dog will lead the group at different times and in search of different resources.

When people talk about dominance, they tend to use the word “dominant” as a characteristic of a particular dog. This is an incorrect use of the word; being “dominant” means to hold control or have a powerful position in a social hierarchy. In groups of domestic dogs, there is not one “alpha.” You will see multiple role reversals as the relationships change based on situations and needs. There is no solidified social hierarchy to be found.

It is still common to hear owners say they need to be dominant over their dog or need to teach their dog who is boss. Most dogs are eager to please the humans in their life and are not interested in “asserting their dominance” over them. Dogs will avoid conflict as much as possible. Body language that people often mistake for guilt is actually a dog trying to offer appeasement behaviours in order to avoid a conflict. A dog growling or baring their teeth is not trying to be dominant but is sending an appropriate communication of discomfort.



Dominance-based training methods are often harsh and cruel. They involve using equipment such as shock and choke collars to issue corrections when a dog has behaved in an unwanted manner and often physically manipulating a dog to do what we want. Many people who use these methods lack the knowledge and understanding of appropriate canine body language. A lot of dominance-based trainers will tell owners to growl at their dogs or, worse, to use an “alpha roll” to put their dog into a “submissive” position. This type of training is harmful and can create or worsen issues of aggression and fear. If we force submission, it is solely based on fear and will not elicit learning but cause our dogs to shut down.

Training methods that are becoming more mainstream focus on positive reinforcement and teaching a dog what is a wanted/appropriate behaviour versus physically punishing them for unwanted or inappropriate behaviour. Many dog trainers are transitioning from traditional training methods to become positive reinforcement trainers. Dogs are motivated by resources like food, toys, and our attention. We can control these resources without being cruel and teach a dog how we expect them to behave. Instead of not allowing a dog to eat or play, we use these resources as motivators. If we are trying to get our dog to learn a new behaviour, we must offer them something in exchange for performing that behaviour. You wouldn't go to work without being compensated and it's the same for any animal: they are not going to do something unless there is a reason for it.

One of the keys of dog training is being able to teach an owner how to effectively communicate with their dog. Dogs primarily use body language to communicate, and they do not understand human language. Whether we realize it or not, dogs are constantly reading our body language and interacting with us based on that. When we think about this in relation to these methods of dog training, it is pretty clear which method a dog would respond to better. If your main interactions with a dog involve using force to push them into a sit, give a tug on their leash, or put them into an alpha roll, they will likely not respond to you with the behaviours you are trying to command. Instead, if we allow a dog to use trial-and-error learning to figure out what we expect of them, then praise them for behaviour we want to see them repeat, they will learn at a much faster rate. When we listen to the ways our dogs try to communicate with us using their body language, we'll build a trusting relationship with them.

Dominance theory and the training that stems from it may create or worsen behaviour issues and will harm the relationship between you and your dog. It's important to always seek educated professional trainers who work hard to build better understanding between owner and dog and implement up-to-date training methods.

