

To Be, or Not to Be, the Alpha

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Since the late 1940's, when the term "alpha dog" was coined, dog training has undergone several changes in theory and practice. Many of the techniques which have grown from the alpha mentality have proven to be harmful: dominance, to the point of physical violence against one's canine friend, had become the norm for many until recently. But was there any benefit behind the concept? Is cooperation and positive reinforcement the only answer? Is there, or isn't there, a pack mentality?

When I was first taught as a professional "dog trainer" in the early 1970's, I was very uncomfortable with the excessive force deemed necessary to gain the proper behavior from my "charges." I evolved into my own style of behavioral guidance through positive reinforcement and found it benefited not only the pet, but the owner as well, who felt less stress and more joy in working together. Unfortunately, there were several aggressive cases which did not respond as well and I soon found that a modified dominance technique was necessary. No biting, kicking, hitting or screaming, but taking control by clearly being the dominant leader was helpful in having a well adjusted dog.

I had my own experience with an aggressive female rottie, who at the age of 16 months (a common age to first press for dominance) woke me from a nap, staring me down to keep me pinned to the couch I was on. She was very well trained and obedient, although stubborn at times. Had I not taken a more dominant role, she would have felt forever in control and would soon be non-respondent to my commands, as I had seen in other cases my clients brought to me that had been allowed their dominance.

As she was now baring some teeth at me, I growled "NO" back at her, failing to get her to back off, I rolled her and pinned her for ten seconds. Our relationship blossomed from then on. She was very happy in knowing her place and accepted me as her leader, her attempt at dominance over me having failed. She remained stubborn, a personality trait that made our lives together more interesting, but always obedient to my voice and hand commands.

A common argument for not engaging in the alpha roll is that dogs are not pack animals. But I beg to differ. Zaezar (my rottie) was definitely the pack leader of our other animals, second only to me. She disciplined the puppies for fighting too hard and taught the kittens not to tear up the couch. She came first to the feeding dishes and got into the car before the other dogs did. They obviously knew her rules, as she knew my rules.

I was her leader and she was my lieutenant, keeping the troops in line until her final days at age fifteen. There was a definite natural pecking order that occurred each time a new member arrived. Some dogs had tried to dominate her, only to be rolled themselves, by her, when needed. I clearly saw this dynamic and had to conclude that we were, in fact, a pack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Newman holds a Doctor of Naturopathy and a Doctor of Philosophy (in Holistic Nutrition) and has been a world renowned pioneer in the field of natural pet care. The author of nine books, including her latest, *Three Simple Steps to Healthy Pets: The Holistic Animal Care LifeStyle®*, Dr. Newman is also the formulator of Azmira Holistic Animal Care® products and diets.



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