



DOMINANT DOGS

Dominant dogs are like some people, mostly pleasant but occasionally disagreeable. The most common cause of aggression by dogs towards their owners or family is that there is a contest for social status or dominance. Violent disputes may occur only occasionally, but the underlying cause is created steadily and subtly by a succession of seemingly innocuous incidents.

The dominance-subordinate dimension is a collection of personality traits that have both inherited and acquired components. Chance, the breed and strain of dog determine the former, the acquired factors happen after birth. Examples of the latter are : litter size and sex ratio; age at weaning; early training; personality of owner; later training; presence of other dogs; illness; hormonal status ...to name but a few.

It can be quite a shock when a dog bites or even threatens the hand that feeds it. But these unpleasant aspects of dominance can to some extent be controlled or diverted so that the more positive aspects of having an assertive pet are preserved.

If you own a dog that has bitten, you should certainly take detailed professional advice from a veterinary surgeon or qualified behaviourist. However, there are some definite do's and don'ts to help owners achieve authority over their pushy dogs. None of the recommendations given below require violence or strength. Better to employ brains rather than brawn when impatience might provoke a bite.

Some or all of the following tips might help turn the tables on a dominant dog :

1. Deprive the dog of accustomed rights and privileges. For instance, deny it access to key areas of the house such as the bedroom, or even upstairs (if applicable). Never allow it on chairs, laps or beds as this brings them up to human level and height reinforces social rank.
2. Do not allow the dog to solicit or demand services or affection of people. Thus, the pushy dog that presses against you or "paddles" your knees with its forepaws should be ignored because it is initiating an affectionate interaction. A few minutes later you can call the dog to COME! SIT!..and then be stroked. Similarly, do not allow the dog to determine time of access to the garden, food, walks etc.
3. Ideally, only stroke the dog or do anything pleasant with it after it has first complied with the SIT!..or DOWN!..or ROLL OVER!..commands. These postures can initially be trained for food rewards or during play outdoors, but used in a more dominant context indoors.
4. All commands must be strictly enforced, which means that only enforceable commands should be given in the first place. For instance, there is no point in shouting COME!.. to a dog that is chasing a rabbit. Wait until you have its attention.
5. Accustom the dog to being handled on the head-neck-shoulder region, and lightly pressed down. The muzzle should be regularly grasped lightly during greetings.
6. Do not play games that the dog seems to "win". For instance, tug-of-war is a disaster because it implies that the dog is as strong as the human opponent is. Do not play "rough and tumble" games. Controlled games are better, such as "fetch" under human control with the DROP! SIT!.. commands before each throw.
7. Regular obedience training should be conducted to some minimum level, though not to competition or display standards. A useful sequence to train is SIT! STAY! (walk away) COME! SIT! (reward/praise). Increase the distance and duration of the STAY!.. command. As a variant on SIT!, train the DOWN!.. command.
8. Do not allow the dog to walk ahead of its handler, particularly through doorways. If it pulls on the lead use a "Halti" headcollar rather than a choker chain.
9. Do not allow the dog to eat human-grade foodstuffs. Either from begged handouts, scraps or palatable fresh meats. Give it dog food, ideally an all in one extruded dry diet such as Pedigree Professional, Eukanuba or Hills science diet, or a meat and cereal product.
10. If your dog is male (7 out of 10 dominant dog problems occur in males rather than females) there may be grounds for having him desexed. These grounds would be strengthened if the dog exhibits other androgen-dependant problem behaviours. For instance is excessively sexy, roams for bitches, frequently urine marks and fights male dogs (but not bitches). A sensible preliminary to castration may be for the veterinary surgeon to administer an anti-androgenic hormone. The behavioural effects of castration can be usefully accelerated and exaggerated by injecting a long acting depo-progesterone.

If some crisis has arisen which necessitates your confronting a dominant dog, be prepared. Perhaps you have to administer ear drops, remove a thorn from its pad or extract bank notes from its teeth ! Under these circumstances, change the context. Go outdoors for instance, fit a "Halti Harness" so that you control the head and stop it biting. In extreme situations, fit a muzzle or have a shrill alarm handy to distract the dog.

Dominant dogs can be very rewarding companions because they retain a pride and presence, which its more submissive and eager to please counterparts have lost. But as in marriage, a mismatch of dog and owner personalities can be disastrous. In these cases, divorce can sometimes be the best for all concerned.