



Dogs are not wolves: Let go of dominance as an explanation for domestic dog behavior!

The domestic dog is far removed morphologically and behaviorally from its predecessor the gray wolf. Although there are few appreciable genetic differences between dogs, coyotes, jackals, and wolves, and these species are capable of interbreeding, dogs have diverged and changed from their wolf-like ancestors.¹

The relationship between dog and human is an affectionate relationship. Dogs often prefer human contact over contact with con-specifics (other dogs) when given the choice.^{2,3} Domestic dogs exhibit different play behavior when interacting with humans as opposed to other dogs.⁴

Humans and dogs share similar social needs; both live in groups, and enjoy social interaction. Dogs and humans each have their own unique and complex communication systems. Problems can arise in humans' relationships with dogs due to miscommunication or in the viewing of the relationship in terms of dominance and submission. Fortunately, domestic dogs do not view humans as con-specifics that should be dominated. Conclusions, are often wrongfully drawn, about dog behavior based on human communication, or erroneously on previous studies of wolf social behavior.

Thankfully, people can rest at ease because regardless of the dog's behavior, he is never trying to exert an 'alpha' status or 'pull rank' on any human inside or outside of the home. Individual relationships are learned through experience, rather than motivated by a desire to dominate.⁵

Throughout the past several decades, the study of dog behavior has been based on observations of adult wolf behavior. Misinterpretation of wolf behavior and the application of dominance theory are detrimental to the human relationship with dogs because it suggests people should maintain a dominant or leadership based and controlling relationship with dogs. Humans never have to be the 'alpha' by performing rollovers, scruff shakes, holding a dog's mouth shut, or any other punishment based techniques recommended to maintain rank. Confrontational training methods, whether staring down dogs, striking them or intimidating them with physical manipulation does little to correct improper behavior and can elicit aggressive responses.⁶

When a person forces a dog into a submissive posture by rolling the dog on his side, the person is actually being confrontational and aggressive to the dog. These techniques often result in human injury and elicit a fear response in the dog. In a wolf pack, a lower ranking wolf will voluntarily offer a submissive posture in order to appease and avoid confrontation. This is a ritualized behavior of wolves that cannot be mimicked or duplicated through human-dog interactions.

Instead humans need to take on a parenting role with dogs. They have to help guide and teach them what desired behaviors within the human domestic environment are. At the same time, people need to be fair by recognizing and providing for the exploratory, social, and physical needs of dogs. Consistency and predictability help dogs thrive.



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Here are some other notable differences between wolves and dogs:

Reproduction

Female wolves cycle annually and are very successful in cooperatively rearing young. Often, only the alpha female is bred by the alpha male.

Most female dogs cycle twice a year and when a female dog comes into heat she is often bred by multiple males. Due to a lack of cooperative rearing, feral dogs are often unsuccessful in rearing young without human intervention.

Social Dynamics

The social system of wolves is based on highly ritualized conflict and a proposed linear “social dominance” hierarchy, although recent research describes wolves as role oriented rather than dominance or status oriented.⁷ Members of the wolf pack are interrelated, they grow up together, hunt cooperatively together, and share a common phenotype (they look alike and behave similarly). Wolf-wolf aggression that results in injury among pack members is rare, as it decreases the pack’s chances for survival. Wolves spend most of their lives in stable social family groups which normally do not incorporate outsiders.^{7,8}

Compared to wolves, little research is available on domestic dog social systems. Feral dogs form loosely organized packs of unrelated individuals generally numbering from two to six.⁹ Stable pairs within groups might be any sex combination. Feral dogs, like wolves, are territorial and aggressive to individuals outside the pack. Their ranges are resource dependent and smaller in urban environments compared to rural environments. Larger congregations of feral dogs are usually seen around trash dumps or landfills. Feral dogs show little of the complex social structure or dominance hierarchy proposed in wolf packs.

The social system of the domestic dog is much more “fluid” when compared to that of wolves or feral dogs. Non-feral domestic dogs form loose, temporary groups and/or interact fleetingly with other dogs during outings with humans.^{9,10} For feral or non-feral domestic dogs, other members of their kind are of no help in locating food items. Domestic dogs do not engage in cooperative hunting. Domestic dogs, whether feral or not, often view other dogs as competitors.¹ Similarly, a group of domestic dogs living within the confines of a household are going to be more likely to be accepting of a familiar dog returning to the household without overt aggression than an unfamiliar dog approaching the property or entering the home.

Resources and Hierarchies

Resources for wolves include food, sleeping areas, possessions, and breeding privileges. These resources are sources of social competition and when stable, provide the construct for a linear social hierarchy.

Resources for the domestic dog in the human domestic environment are constantly changing when compared to resources present in the social system of wolves. Resources for the domestic dog and in the human domestic environment are variable and might include people, other pets, resting locations, feeding locations, toys, and food-based items. Breeding privileges are usually not a factor, since most domestic dogs are spayed or neutered. Social affiliations with people, dogs, and other pets in the



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typical human household might fluctuate daily, or at different developmental periods and life stages as resources come and go in the environment. Generally, a 3-year-old socially mature adult dog is going to be more accepting and tolerant of the wild exuberance of a prepubescent 4-month-old puppy than an adolescent teenage dog or 3-year-old socially mature adult dog. Fluidity of resources coming and going in the environment produces instability for inter-dog social relationships. Affiliations with other dogs are forced within the confines of a multi-dog household and often the individuals are unrelated. The domestic dog faces more social challenges and must adapt to the fluidity of the ever-changing human world.

Linear dominance hierarchies are difficult to construct in domestic dogs because of variation within a group of dogs and affiliations with dogs outside of the group. Winners in contests of “dominance” between two individuals might vary depending on the context. A group of dogs must stay together long enough for a statistical pattern to emerge. More than likely, domestic dogs do not form social hierarchies in the same way as wolves, and those hierarchies do not transcend species or include humans.

Communication

The social construct of the wolf pack is invariably different from that of the domestic dog because communication between dogs is often more convoluted. Phenotypic variation (variation of genetic traits and the appearance) of domestic dog breeds affects body structures used for signaling and communicating with other dogs. Puppies of domestic dogs who are removed from the litter at an early age (prior to 6 weeks of age) or who are not socialized with various different breeds of dogs prior to 4 months of age often lack proper social communication skills with dogs that look or act differently than what they are accustomed to.

Conclusion

More understanding of the social system of the domestic dog will come from evaluating dogs in the human domestic environment rather than making comparisons with wolves. Similarly, although comparisons can be made, the social construct of human behavior cannot be fully understood by evaluating the behavior of chimpanzees.



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