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Canine Social Structure

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The Pack

The basic unit of canine social structure is the pack, something that is not easy to study in a domestic situation. However, we can project what we do know about dogs, wild dogs and wolves to understand how stable hierarchies are maintained.

Domestic dogs do well in group-living situations and are fairly flexible as to the arrangements. In the wild, the typical number of wild dogs or wolves in a fully-fledged pack ranges between eight and 15. The group usually consists of related adult males, related adult females (that are unrelated to the males), and their offspring. Order is maintained by means of an almost linear hierarchical relationship between pack members, an arrangement known as a dominance hierarchy. In essence, this means that there are leaders and followers. The most



dominant individuals control the resources and subordinates must defer or face the consequences. In most cases, subordinates defer because earlier fights or threats have indicated that fighting would be a losing proposition. Dominance hierarchies comprise two independent orders based on the animals' sex. At the top of the male hierarchy is the most dominant or “alpha” male. Females are subservient to the alpha female. Next in line to the alpha male is the beta male; in the female ranks, the beta female is below the alpha female and so on. The least dominant male and female members are called the omega.

Dominant vs. Subordinate Dogs

Dominant animals eat first, get the best resting areas, and get the first choice of mates. But there are responsibilities that come with the privilege of dominant status. They are responsible for initiating and terminating all pack activities, physically leading the others when a move is in order, and for warning and defending the pack against impending dangers. The alpha male and female suffer the least stress because they are in charge of their own destinies and all resources. This is especially true when the pack is static i.e. remaining in one area. Conversely, omega animals experience the most stress and frustration and sometimes eventually leave the

pack or are chased off. Subordinates come into their own when the pack is on the move. They seem to be at an advantage when the environment is changing, perhaps because they have had to be more flexible and responsive to threats and challenges than their more dominant counterparts.

The Domestic Pack

The question is often raised whether dogs see their human family as members of the pack. I believe the answer to this question is that they do. I don't think for a minute that dogs think we're other dogs. I do think, however, that all interactions between dogs and their owners are based on the only paradigm for interaction with which they are endowed, that is, the law of the pack. To come to this conclusion one has to study the behavior of domestic dogs living in a "pack" containing one or more dogs and several people.

We can learn some lessons about basic communication systems and culture by studying the social behavior of wild dogs and wolves, but the acid test for domestic interactions is in the home, where things are different. Not only is the situation different but the dogs are different as well. We have selectively bred dogs to be the way we want them, both in terms of appearance and behavior. We have increased their sociability and playfulness while decreasing their fear and intelligence. Some scientists, like Dr. Ray Coppinger of the University of New Hampshire, say that we have "neotenized" them, making them more juvenile in looks and behavior than their feral ancestors. If they are this different, then the behavior of their ancestors should probably only be used as a guide or starting point, and not as the definitive word.

The Domestic Pack Theory

- **Dominance-related aggression:** For years, behavioral experts blamed unstable or disordered dominance relationships within the home when dogs acted aggressively toward their families over resources or certain physical interventions. This is currently under dispute. Antagonists of this view point out that in wolf packs there is little overt aggression and that truly dominant wolves (and dogs) do not need to be blatantly aggressive. These folk say that in-home aggression of domestic dogs toward their owners is more correctly ascribed to fear and point out that other fear-based behaviors are common in such dogs.

Although classically "dominant aggressive" dogs do seem more anxious, the problem may still stem from confusion over pack hierarchy. Perhaps dogs that show aggression to their owners in typical dominance-type situations (over food, toys, favorite resting area, in response to postural interventions, or following threats) are somewhat confused about the family order and therefore a little anxious. A true alpha animal may not feel anxious because he is not challenged, but a beta dog tends to be aggressive to subordinates if certain limits are exceeded as they struggle to maintain their position.

They are, so to speak, dominant wannabes rather than those that have made the grade. This more correctly describes the situation within the home when a "dominant dog" is aggressive to human family members. Maybe we should call dominance aggression the "beta dog syndrome," or maybe we should just keep the term we have used for years. After all, dominance issues are involved, even though the aggressive dog may not have the most supreme level of confidence.

- **Sibling rivalry:** When dogs have lived in the same home together for years, they usually manage to sort out their differences and exist peacefully together. This order is maintained by

an arrangement very similar to that in the wolf or wild dog pack. Most dog owners can identify the dog that is leader of their pack of two to three dogs. Problems occur when a youngster reaches puberty and tries to usurp a more senior dog. There can also be problems when an older dog begins to fail and a beta dog sees the opportunity to move up in the ranks. At these times there may be some feuding and without human intervention there is often a resolution to these matters, though not always the one that the owners want or can accept.

In wolf packs, infighting arises when an alpha wolf loses control or dies. At times like these, the normally peaceful hierarchy is disturbed until a new order is formed. Domestic dogs are similar in this respect. Really bad things happen when human family members intervene to support a failing order that is contrary to what natural forces dictate. In this situation, a would-be subordinate or newcomer may gain status by virtue of his affiliation with the owners. This ensures that fighting will continue and may well escalate if corrective steps are not taken. Corrective steps involve supporting the true leader and relegating the subordinate to a beta or gamma role. Most often a “senior support program” is the way to go, lending human support to the older and incumbent dog when newcomers are involved.

The fact that support in this way often works is more testimony to the similarities of the domestic dog situation to the one in the wild. In wolf packs and wild dog packs, age and experience are powerful influences helping to determine the rightful order, and thus peace.

Dogs need strong though not aggressive leaders. More willful dogs need stronger leaders. The only problem with the domestic pack is that we humans often do not know the correct ways to respond to our dogs' demands and inadvertently destabilize the hierarchy. Then there can be trouble in the form of aggression and general confusion in the ranks. This must be avoided at all costs.



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