

Leadership Program

Like children, dogs need guidelines and boundaries. Good leadership will earn your dog's respect and help him to feel secure. Here are a few ways to establish leadership:

1. *The Leader Controls The Resources.* Just as parents control allowance, curfew and use of the car, you should control all the “good stuff” when it comes to your dog. Start with food and play:

Food is an incredibly valuable resource. As such, it should come from you, not from that round thing that is always magically full! Feed twice daily, rather than leaving food down. If your dog does not eat after ten minutes, pick the food up and put it away. Most dogs, even those previously free-fed, will quickly adapt to the new routine; no dog will starve himself. (If your dog is tiny, hypoglycemic, or has medical issues, check with your vet before switching to scheduled feedings.) For dogs with severe leadership issues, or to kick-start your program, hand-feed meals (a few pieces at a time) for two weeks. Have your dog sit, shake, or down to get each handful of food.

Control toys and games. Leave your dog with a few toys, but reserve the really special ones for when you are present. Bring them out periodically and play with your dog. Now you are also the source of all fun! *Note:* Playing tug is fine as long as you control the game, and your dog knows “Drop it” (aka “Out”). Bring out the toy; initiate tug. Periodically freeze, followed by saying, “Drop it.” When your dog releases, wait a beat, say, “Take it” and resume the game. (If at any time teeth touch skin, say, “Too bad!” and put the toy away.) When you have finished playing, put the toy away out of your dog’s reach.

2. *Put Your Dog on a Learn to Earn Program.* That means he must do something for you in order to earn anything that is valuable to him. If your dog wants to be petted, ask him to sit first. If he’s already sitting, ask him to lie down. Then pet. Have him sit (or do another behavior he knows) before meals, treats, walks, tossing the ball, and anything else he finds valuable.
3. *Furniture Privileges – Yes or No?* If there are no leadership issues and he will get down when asked, no problem! He can come up when invited. For dogs who are pushy and think they’re in charge, no couch/bed privileges until leadership is better established, and then only when invited.
4. *Control the Space.* If your dog zigzags in front as you walk, crowds you as you sit, or otherwise intrudes on your space, that’s not very polite! Leaders control space. For zigzagers, keep your feet firmly on the floor and shuffle right on through. Your dog will learn to move when legs approach. If you are standing and your dog crowds you, use your lower body to gently push him away. If you are sitting, fold your arms and gently move him away using your upper arm or forearm—do not speak or look at him as you do so. (Teaching “Off” is also helpful.) At doorways (until your dog has learned to “Wait” or “Back up”), either push your dog aside gently with your lower body or step in front to block his path. It is not necessary that you always pass through doorways first, but it should be your choice, and shoving is never acceptable!
5. *Training.* Practice obedience exercises and incorporate them into your everyday life. Down-stays are especially good for establishing leadership. Keep practice sessions short and frequent.
6. *Handling.* Teach your dog to accept handling. Do daily massage, including paws, ears and mouth. This practice also makes for easier groomer/veterinary visits and alerts you to any physical abnormalities. (If your dog has issues about being handled, address them with a trainer’s help.)
7. *Good leaders are not bullies!* Reprimand verbally when necessary, then forgive and move on. Never use scruff-shakes, jerking, hitting or other harsh physical corrections. Use praise and rewards to let your dog know when he is doing the right thing. Above all, be a kind and patient leader.

Leadership Versus Dominance

by Nicole Wilde, CPDT

I recently attended a lecture given by a self-styled “dog psychologist” on how to improve your relationship with your dog. One of the main points made was that dogs don’t need a loving leader, but rather, a strong leader who uses “domination.” Owners were advised to use the alpha roll (forcing the dog on his back, holding him down and staring until he submits) to “show the dog who’s boss.” I was saddened to hear this regurgitation of the old, strong-arm techniques in this enlightened day and age. The truth is, you can be both a strong *and* a loving leader.

Techniques like alpha rolls and scruff shakes are purportedly based on the behavior of the dog’s ancestor, the wolf. Studies done in the wild years ago reported that wolves use the alpha roll to discipline and control other pack members. In later years, those studies were disproved. What ethologists observed was that when a wolf wanted to dominate another, he would “muzzle pin,” that is, place his own muzzle, mouth wide open, teeth bared, gently over the muzzle of the other. The pinned wolf would then roll over and submit *voluntarily*. That’s an important distinction. In fact, if a wolf forcefully slams another to the ground, teeth around his neck, staring hard, chances are he means to kill that animal. Is that really the message you want to send to your dog?

If your dog has aggression issues, using force will only make the problem worse. It may look for the moment as though the issue has been solved, because the dog stops the aggressive display immediately. Of course he does; you’re physically stronger, and you’re threatening him. His reaction is an act of self-preservation. In reality, you’re only suppressing the aggression, and causing stress that will assuredly resurface—and it won’t be pretty. It may reappear as other seemingly unrelated behavior problems, or even more intense aggression. Besides, what happens if one family member uses force, but the others are not as physically or psychologically capable of doing so? I can tell you, because that’s the case with many families I’m called in to work with. When the person using the force-based techniques (often the adult male in the household) is away, the dog challenges the ones he might have a chance of dominating—usually the wife or kids.

Another fascinating fact from the world of wolves is that the “alpha” or top-ranking wolf does not need to prove a thing. Good alphas rule with a calm air of dignity. They are assertive when necessary, but are not bullies. At Wolf Park, a research and educational facility in Indiana, those alpha wolves who ruled with a heavy paw were quickly deposed by other pack members. Those who ruled wisely ruled longer. It’s actually the middle-ranking, wanna-be alphas who do all the squabbling. They have something to prove. You shouldn’t.

So remember: Be kind, be fair, be consistent. Be a good leader. Your dog will love you for it.

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