



**KATHY KOPELLIS McLEOD** the dog behaviour consultant helps us understand our canine companions

# DOGS EXPECT US TO LEAD

*Using positive reinforcement-based methods will enable you to show your pet what your expectations are*

**T**HE terms “dominance” and “alpha” are frequently used by people to describe their dog’s behaviour, but the accuracy of the words is questionable.

One way of defining dominance is when it describes a relationship between individuals, with one having more status than the other in a given context.

The dominance theory is outdated and based on the wolf model, which has since been reviewed. The previous evidence was flimsy.

While dominance is not an incorrect term in itself, it is often over-used, misused or misunderstood.

More accurate, up-to-date findings reveal that the supposedly dominant dog doesn’t physically force another to roll over. Instead, the seemingly submissive one voluntarily rolls over as an act of appeasement and respect. Social animals achieve stability in the group by deference not force.

Alternative motivations exist for other points mentioned below. These include anxiety, stress, arousal, fearfulness and at the crux of all of these is that the dog simply hasn’t been properly trained.

## WHAT TO DO

Domestic dogs are dependent upon us and, just like children, they are happier if they know they can count on us to take charge. Dogs need us to be leaders in the way of good parents, good teachers and good bosses.

All humans in the family should conduct themselves in a humane and assertive manner to ensure your

dog understands that you are all in charge. You will accomplish your ends more efficiently if you teach your dog what your expectations are by employing positive reinforcement-based methods.

## SETTING BOUNDARIES

Teach them that to get what they want they need to behave in a patient and polite manner, rather than being pushy and rude. Just like us, dogs need boundaries. They need to learn frustration tolerance and emotional control. Therefore, avoid giving your dog everything it wants, every time it demands it.

Dogs catered to by their owners can potentially become problem dogs because the dog has never been taught to tolerate not getting what it wants.

## DANGERS OF USING AGGRESSION TO RESOLVE AGGRESSION

The concept of gaining dominance over your dog does great harm to the dog and to our relationship with it. Most people interpret this to mean that you should physically force your dog into submission or act like a dictator. This can lead to your dog acting fearfully, or escalate to defensive aggression because it fears you.

One of the most commonsense behaviour modification strategies is that you don’t respond to dominance or aggression by emulating it. Your

dog is growling, snapping, snarling, etc. What is your desired outcome? Do you want to calm your dog or escalate its aggression? Yelling at the animal, or physically reprimanding it, is more than likely to increase the aggressive behaviour. Choose how you act wisely, as the consequences could be serious if you choose aggression.

## EXITING DOORWAYS

There is no evidence that by letting your dog exit doorways before you you’re letting it be in charge. There are obviously good safety reasons for having dogs go through doorways “politely”, not necessarily before, after or alongside you, but certainly under your direction. An uncontrolled dog hooning through a doorway/gate can be a danger to itself and others. You should do these things for the purpose of consistency and good manners – not for dominance myth reasons.

## BEDS AND COUCHES

Allowing dogs to sleep on beds or couches does not create aggressive dogs. There are many aggressive dogs that have never been on a bed or couch and there are plenty of well-mannered dogs that sleep on the bed and couch. Dogs that display aggression on beds and couches should lose privileges until the underlying issue for their behaviour has been addressed.

## WHO SHOULD EAT FIRST?

If you control your dog’s feeding regime, what you do before you give the food is unimportant. You may as well dance *Gangnam Style* or pluck off any unwanted hairs! You control your dog’s access to the resource, full stop. A more productive alternative would be to take advantage of this time to reinforce patience, good manners, eye contact, self control,

etc. Your dog will not evict you from your throne if it eats before you.

## THE DOG AND THE LEAD

Many dog owners are confused about how their dog should walk when on a lead. This warrants a simple and commonsense explanation.

Dog owners are mindlessly told that for their dog to know its place it must walk alongside them, or even more ridiculously, behind them (good luck with that one!). If your dog pulls, then training or walking devices are available.

If your dog is aggressive then you need to have better control, but if your good-natured dog simply trots in front of you on the lead and both of you are happy, there is no good reason in the world why your dog should be thrust behind you.

## LABELLING A DOG DOMINANT

Quite often techniques to address the “dominant” dog range from pointless, nonsensical to the harmful.

**What is most concerning is that in the cause of denying them so-called dominance, dogs have**

**been mistreated in the following manner:**

- \* Strung up on the collar
- \* Hit and kicked
- \* Devices thrown close to or at the dog in order to intimidate and frighten
- \* Yelled at abruptly
- \* Pinned down/alpha rolled, turned over on their back, growled and stared at
- \* Harshly jerked on with choker chains and pinch collars.

How you label something will directly influence how you respond to it. For the sake of your dog’s quality of life, I encourage you to question anything you are told about what to do with your dog and keep questioning until you receive an answer that not only makes sense but also is a humane way to handle your pet.

Visit [www.kathysdogtraining.com.au](http://www.kathysdogtraining.com.au) for further information about dog behaviour and training and while you’re there, sign up to receive some free dog training tips. Check out Kathy’s newly released 2013 dates for her popular Intensive Dog Workshop designed for reactive dogs.



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