

## **Dominant !! Are some dogs labelled incorrectly?**

**By Winkie Spiers**

Firstly what does 'dominant' mean? Controlling, commanding, prevailing over all others, very important, powerful, successful. (does that sound like anyone you know?)

For years I've heard the word 'dominant' being used to describe dog behaviour that in many instances, in my opinion, is anything but. It seems to be used as a nice tidy blanket term to diagnose a large number of behaviours or actions that are deemed to be undesirable to the human. Before embarking on any labelling or behaviour modification it's vital to ensure that there is no underlying health or pain issue that may be causing the problem and then look at the real cause of the problem rather than the symptom. Once a 'dominant' diagnosis has been made it can, in some cases, lead to justification for harsh, inappropriate, cruel, ignorant, dangerous, painful and confusing training techniques being practiced on the dog. I really believe that dogs are wrongly diagnosed as dominant and that more needs to be done by professionals and owners to understand the true motivation for the unwanted behaviour. The only truly dominant behaviour seems to be practised by humans and unfortunately for animals and the planet no-one has come up with a dominance reduction plan for us!! That however is a whole other can of worms!

Who originally came up with this term 'dominant'? It may have originated with studies done on wolf packs which may not be hugely relevant when we are actually dealing with domesticated dogs who have undergone 10 – 15,000 years of selective breeding. The fact is that many dogs now live in social isolation from their own kind, and their humans, often for long periods of time which will obviously have a bearing on their behaviours. An inability to practice normal instinctive dog behaviours, boredom, inappropriate exercise and age will also affect matters – adolescence is a difficult time for many mammals. Although dogs share many characteristics with wolves and there are many papers and books written about their similarities we will only really learn about domesticated dogs if we observe and learn about domesticated dogs.

In the first instance we must understand what a dog is and how it naturally communicates, what its basic needs are and how we can teach it to understand us and our many confusing rules, demands and expectations. Of course all these things can vary depending on the breeding and breed of dog, state of health, age and previous experiences. We need to deal with proper facts rather than hearsay and look honestly at what each individual dog is trying to tell us. With appropriate learning and common sense we can respond to, and live with, dogs in ways which can be much better understood by them. Then when we look at appropriate techniques to deal with behaviour it's important that the knowledge of the people dispensing advice is up to date and relevant and that it is backed by proper knowledge. It's important to be able to make it clear to dogs what we want in a kind and encouraging way so that we inspire confidence and trust. Nobody likes a tyrant!

**Some common behaviours that may be diagnosed as 'dominant' can include;**

**Growling** – very often interpreted as a 'dominant' behaviour and one that I frequently find is fear based. Quite often by the time a dog vocalises with a growl it's probably told us, or another dog, using body language and expression that it's unhappy with the current circumstances. If we don't understand how dogs communicate then we

are unable to interpret their body language, in effect we are ignoring them, not listening or understanding. What happens if we are not listened to or understood? We raise our voices, become frustrated, perhaps upset, scared and worried, a growl is a raising of the voice when other signals have been ignored.

For instance, a dog growls when someone goes near their food – is it being dominant? If dominance is diagnosed then there are some who think that the dog should have its food taken away frequently to show it who's boss! Will this make the dog feel better understood? Will that promote a trusting and happy relationship? Probably not. Do well socialised adult dogs take food from each other? Is it a form of behaviour that dogs understand? I don't think so. Dogs that growl when someone goes near their food may have learned to do that as they have become confused and frightened by people frequently taking things from them. Food is a primary resource to a dog much as money seems to be a primary resource for many humans, if money or possessions are taken from us without asking we would very likely become rather grumpy and unhappy and most likely frightened as well so how might a domesticated dog feel when it's not a natural behaviour that they practice on each other. As puppies and dogs explore the world and very often pick things up to taste them, see what the texture is and find out what they are, children do this as well but if we constantly take things away from them with no warning or aggressively this can make them a little afraid of us. This may result in perhaps trying to hang on to their possessions harder – this isn't dominant behaviour it's fear and confusion. When they explore or pick something up which is a natural and normal behaviour and we shout 'NO' and rush over to grab the item from their mouths it's actually very rude and confusing behaviour on our part which may lead to growling as the dog endeavours to let us know peacefully that we are not being very nice – so in that type of circumstance is it right to label a dog as 'dominant'? Many growling dogs that I see are afraid of the humans and growl to try to keep the human away – fear and dominance are poles apart. What happens when growling is punished and ignored?? Perhaps through increased fear and frustration the dog will nip or bite or it may just shut down realising that whatever it does will not make any difference to our behaviour.

**Jumping up** – another behaviour that is often termed 'dominant'. Puppies when they are very young are often initially rewarded with lots of attention when they jump up and as they get older they realise some don't like the jumping up and others do – inconsistency is confusing to a young puppy or an older dog. Normal well socialised dogs don't often jump up at each other except in play so it's something that we do that makes them jump up at us. If we observe what happens when a puppy jumps at a well mannered adult dog you will often see the adult dog just turn their head away and gently let the puppy know that they don't like it. The human reaction to jumping up is often either rewarding, confusing, painful or scary. If we are clear about what we want and turn away silently when a dog jumps up in most cases it will stop. So is jumping up dominant behaviour or a learned behaviour?

**Going through a door first!!** Personally I haven't found or read any conclusive proof that allowing a dog to walk through a doorway before the human will lead to 'dominant' behaviour. I prefer my own dogs to go through doorways or gates before me so that I can ensure that they are safely through and that a door can't swing on to them. If I asked I'm sure that they would sit and wait while I went through first but normally I ask them to go through then I follow and this hasn't caused any behaviour problems. I certainly want to see dogs walking calmly through doorways but if they are barging and rushing I suspect that it's excitement, anticipation, fear or stress that's causing it and not 'dominance'. Many dogs get excited about the front door as it leads to going for a walk, this may be a learned behaviour which is easily rectified.

I'm not going to go through all the behaviours but the examples above should make it clear that it's important to understand what is motivating the behaviour before any label is put on it. 'Dominant' seems to have a nice ring to it for some as it is a clear diagnosis but the danger is that I've yet to come across a dog that I think is correctly labelled as dominant which is extremely sad as it means that a great many dogs are completely misunderstood resulting in many dogs and owners missing out on having an enjoyable, trusting and understanding relationship.

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