

# THE DOMINANT DOG

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The terms *dominant* and *submissive* are used widely in the canine field to describe dogs. Dominance is a concept that refers to an individual's ability to maintain and regulate access to a resource. When considering social hierarchies, the dominant individual is the leader and will win the majority of confrontations. The submissive individual is the lower-ranking animal that will often engage in distance reducing/appeasement behaviors to prevent an aggressive encounter. The social hierarchy of canids is thought to be fairly linear in nature.

The most common presenting complaint to veterinary behaviorists is that a dog is exhibiting aggressive behavior. Many diagnostic categories of aggression have been identified including:

- maternal aggression,
- territorial aggression,
- inter-dog aggression,
- redirected aggression,
- food-related aggression,
- possessive aggression,
- predatory aggression,
- idiopathic aggression,
- dominance-related aggression,
- pain-related aggression,
- fear aggression, and
- play aggression.

Aggressive behavior exhibited by a dog is usually normal canine behavior. When dogs are living in social contact with humans, the aggression is usually unacceptable. Of the types of aggression listed above, one of the most frequent diagnoses is that of dominance-related aggression.

The dog considers human family members as part of its pack. Within the pack there is a leadership hierarchy. Problems tend to occur when the owner is unwilling or unable to maintain a dominant position in the pack. The dog uses aggression to control situations. Usually the presenting complaint is that the dog growls or snaps at family members in fairly predictable situations. However, sometimes the owner reports that the dog shows aggression for no reason. In the latter case, the owner often doesn't recognize the triggers for the aggression. Examples of common situations that trigger dominance-related aggression include:

- when the dog is protecting food or certain objects (toys, stolen objects)
- when the dog is disturbed when sleeping/resting
- when the owner is trying to lead the dog by the collar
- when the owner is disciplining the dog
- when the owner is grooming the dog, or
- any situation where the dog perceives actions of the human as a challenge or perhaps a

violation of its high social rank.

Another hypothesis for dominance-related aggression is that, as a youngster, the puppy learns that aggression motivated by fear, conflict or play often results in the retreat of the person with whom they are interacting. The puppy learns that through aggression it can get itself out of any uncomfortable situation and this aggressive behavior perpetuates into adulthood. This would explain the cases of “dominance” aggression that have an early onset and would also explain the often ambivalent signals shown by the “dominant” dog during a conflict. Finally, it would account for the success associated with treatment of anxiolytic medications for “dominance” aggression.

The target for dominance-related aggression is usually a family member or a familiar person. This makes sense when the underlying motivation for the aggression is examined. Family members are part of the “pack” whereas unfamiliar people lack this relationship with the dog. Usually unfamiliar people do not engage in triggers for dominance-related aggression - in general they don't place themselves in situations of conflict with the dog.

The breeds of dogs most likely to be diagnosed with dominance-related aggression were identified in reviews of cases seen by three different independent behavioral practices. Of the 26 breeds represented, the most common breeds diagnosed with dominance-related aggression were: English Springer Spaniel, Cocker Spaniel, Golden Retriever and Lhasa Apso. Some of these breed tendencies may be due to popularity of a specific breed or the expectations of that breed. For example, if there happened to be a larger number of Cocker Spaniels in a certain area relative to other breeds, they may be over represented. Also, the owner of a Golden Retriever may be more likely to seek assistance for an aggression problem than that of a Rottweiler owner because the expectation of the Golden Retriever was to be a safe family dog. That said, on a national survey, English Springer Spaniel owners reported that 48% of the dogs surveyed had growled, snapped or bitten family members in contexts related to dominance issues. A particular kennel in the pedigrees of those aggressive dogs indicated a genetic basis of this behavior.

The age of onset of dominance-related aggression is most commonly thought to be at social maturity around two years of age. However, it has been described in very young dogs (i.e. five months) and can also occur in older dogs. The onset of dominance aggression in older dogs is often due to social changes in the household (i.e. new baby).

Although dominance-related aggression is seen in both male and female dogs, male dogs are more likely to exhibit dominance-related aggression. Neutering has some effect on decreasing dominance-related aggression. In one recent study, about 25% of adult male dogs significantly decreased the amount and severity of aggression exhibited toward their owners after neutering. There has been some evidence that ovariohysterectomy in female dogs already exhibiting dominance-related aggression may result in an increase in aggression.

Treatment for dominance-related aggression involves restructuring the dominance hierarchy in the household. Non-confrontational techniques are preferred due to safety and treatment success. The dominance of the owners is reinforced in a non-confrontational manner by controlling affection/food/resources and having the dog defer to the owner to receive these valuable things. A head halter can impart better control of the dog to the owner and offer a safe/consistent method of dealing with aggression. Social isolation of an hour's duration is used to punish aggressive displays. Privileges such as access to furniture are removed from the dog. Drug therapy may be considered by veterinarians, especially if underlying anxiety is

thought to contribute to the aggression.