



# The Dominance Theory

## Is my dog being dominant?

Rest assured, regardless of how they're behaving, your dog is neither being dominant, nor using dominance, to get what they want!

## What is the 'Dominance Theory' all about?

The Dominance Theory asserts that dogs constantly desire to gain a higher status than other dogs, or the people around them, and that it is this desire to be the 'number one' or 'winner' that might lead them to become aggressive, in order to dominate the other dog or person, and to end up in control of their environment. **Science now teaches that this is completely incorrect!**

Unfortunately, the Dominance Theory is a misleading interpretation of why dogs behave in the ways that they do and has resulted in the development of training techniques that use punishment or force. These types of training techniques claim that people need to 'show the dog his place' at the bottom of the group, or pack, and can use physical control to teach him so.

## How did the Dominance Theory come about?

Very early research into wolf behaviour studied a group of unrelated wolves, living in captivity. Researchers witnessed the wolves using aggression between each other and fighting over valuable resources like food and mates, with the most aggressive wolves gaining the very best of everything.

Because dogs are directly descended from wolves, it was then suggested that individual dogs would also fight to be the leader or 'alpha' of their pack and obtain the best that life had to offer in this way. The theory became so popular that it was even used to interpret interactions between dogs and people, and assumed that dogs see their owners as direct competitors in the struggle for top social status!

## Dogs are not fabled wolves!

Although dogs originated from wolves, they have evolved over thousands of years into a different species altogether, with altered appearances and behaviours. Dogs are social animals who base their relationships on individual experiences. They can own behaviour in response. This is very different from the idea that their single desire is to dominate each other.

## So, what's wrong with the Dominance Theory?

The problem with the Dominance Theory is that it is based in the behaviour of wolves when living in a very unnatural environment, in which they were captive and resources such as food were limited. Unable to spread out and find their own food, shelter and mates, the wolves had no other option than to compete for these within their confinement. The wolves were not family members, did not have enough space to live in successfully, and were expected to share resources that they just wouldn't normally in the wild – so it wasn't a realistic way to learn about wolf behaviour at all! These captured wolves behaved very differently indeed to their wild counterparts!

Up to date research studying the behaviour of wolf groups living freely in the wild has shown that rather than being aggressive and fighting over resources like food, shelter and mating opportunities, wolves live in extremely co-operative and collaborative family groups. Offspring remain with the family to learn from their parents and to help raise other litters.

In the wild, when resources are scarce, then rather than fight, wolves will simply disperse and spread out into smaller groups across a wider range of land. They naturally avoid conflict where possible, because it puts them in danger of coming to harm themselves.

## How might the Dominance Theory affect dogs today?

If an owner believes that a dog is constantly trying to 'be the boss' then they might feel that they have to demonstrate to the dog that he is not the boss and that they, in fact, are! An owner might do this by using punishment and discipline that might be both unpleasant and painful for the dog.

Using methods that aim to control a dog's behaviour with physical force and shouting are likely to result in a dog feeling intimidated and scared. While these techniques might work to stop the unwanted behaviour, this is because the dog is too scared to do it, frightened of being reprimanded – particularly as this might be painful.

Training methods such as pushing or pulling a dog into a position, holding a dog down, choke chains, electric shock collars, shouting and smacking are not only detrimental to the dog-owner bond, but might also actually make the behaviour worse because the dog is now anxious, fearful and unlikely to trust his owner.

**If you are experiencing problems with your dog's behaviour first, have their health checked by your veterinary surgeon, who can then refer you to a qualified behaviourist for some expert help!**

**Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs.  
If you need help for your Dogs Trust Dog please email: [reception@dogstrust.ie](mailto:reception@dogstrust.ie)**

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