

Understanding Dominance

Dominance, when discussing canine behavior, really has to do with how Rover views his relationships. Dominance is not aggression and while there can be dominant aggression that is more suited to a discussion about aggression than one about dominance. Simply put dominance is status and stature within a group hierarchy.

Rover's ancestors lived in packs organized in a way to ensure their survival. There were leaders that had the responsibilities of keeping the pack safe, finding shelter and food and producing offspring. The leaders were the most dominant pack members. Typically they were the biggest, fastest, and strongest members. They were the ones that directed the actions of the pack. They controlled resources such as food, space and attention. They made and enforced the pack's rules.

Typically this was all done without aggression. Dogs within a pack normally won't fight with each other because dogs with injuries are a liability to the survival of the pack. Survival is the essential reason for living in a pack. Dogs are probably social animals for that reason. It's easier for a pack to survive than for an individual dog to survive. Struggles for leadership only occur out of necessity when the current leaders become inconsistent or are hurt and unable to fulfill the responsibilities that come with leadership. As long as the pack has leadership there is no reason to apply for the job.

Today dogs live with us and we provide the food and shelter and it's our responsibility to keep everyone safe. Dogs however have retained some of the "pack" instincts their ancestors had. They are still social animals; they still need to figure out their place in the pack, which is now our family. How they figure out their place in the family and how we view relationships can often create confusion between dogs and people. People typically look at the relationship first from an affection standpoint and dogs first want to figure out who's in charge.

Rover needs to figure out who is in charge in our family and what his place in the "pack" is. We no longer need to hunt for food so there is no one leading the hunt. We have houses that shelter us from the elements and readily available food and water so there is no reason to seek new shelters as food and water resources become scarce. So how does Rover figure out his place in the family's hierarchy? He does it by testing in various ways.

Rover will test by asking us to do things and then gauging or measuring our responses. He might bring a ball or other toy and drop it in our lap or next to us. Rover might nudge our hand asking us to pet him. Rover might go to the door and ask to be let out. He might even take an item to try to entice us into a game of chase.

How we respond to Rover's "tests" tells him who is in charge. If we do what he wants us to do then he's controlling the actions of the pack so he thinks he's in charge. If we don't then he'll believe that we are the leaders. It's a simple concept but it often goes against our nature.

We get dogs because we want to play and love them. We can feel guilty if we don't play with him or pet him when he asks us too, especially if we are gone at work all day and he's been left by himself. This is also common with rescued dogs that might have had a less than happy start to life. People can feel they need to "make up" for previous neglect or abuse. This is human nature but it is not canine nature.

Most dogs are born followers, not leaders. If dogs were naturally born leaders they would not do well living in groups because every dog would want to be in charge. So while most dogs don't want to be in charge, they know, from their canine viewpoint that someone needs to be the

leader. If he doesn't receive leadership signals, that he understands, from us, Rover will attempt to become the leader in our home. He doesn't understand that the same pack rules his ancestors lived by are no longer valid. If we give Rover signals that he's in charge it's very likely he'll be stressed. The responsibilities that come with leadership can be overwhelming for most dogs as they don't have the temperament or confidence needed to be leaders.

If Rover is in charge then he'll feel that it's his responsibility to lead on walks. He might try to guard the den, our house, from intruders which are usually our friends and family. Rover might get upset when we leave because again, from his perspective, we're subordinates and lower ranking pack members don't leave the den without the protection of the leader.

If Rover thinks he's in charge he'll act in a dominant manner and will display dominant body language with us. He'll make direct eye contact with us. It's likely his tail will be up when he engages us or people entering "his" den. He may bark at us for attention or even jump on people coming in. He might even get upset or angry if we don't do what he asks us to do. Conversely he might not do things we ask him to do or only do them if there is something in it for him.

Dominance is situational. As I stated, most dogs really don't want to be the leaders. Rover might display dominance with his family but might quickly submit to another dog that is more naturally dominant. I frequently see this happen.

Dominance can be passive or active. Passively dominant dogs are often very good at getting their families to respond to them. Rover will be asking his family to do things so nicely they don't even realize they are giving in to his every request. People living with these dogs will often think their dogs are not very smart because they act as if they don't have a clue what to do when they are asked to do something they don't want to do. They might turn their backs on someone asking them to come. They might develop a sudden itch behind the ear when asked to sit.

Actively dominant dogs are a bit more noticeable. They might be vocal, whining or barking for attention. They may steal items to start games of chase and they are likely to jump on family members. They often have more noticeable or annoying behaviors. These can all be symptoms of situations that are stressful for Rover. Dogs feeling comfortable with their relationships are usually calm and relaxed. Dogs that are feeling stressed with their roles are often excitable or even hyperactive.

Dogs are a different species. They have a different view of the world and relationships. They communicate differently than we do. They can't change their point of view or look at relationships differently. Only we have the ability to look at things from a different perspective.

When we understand our dogs and provide the leadership they instinctively seek they'll learn how to fit into our families the way we want. When we ignore or don't understand their pack instincts they will try to arrange their world, our families, to suit their needs. There are only two choices for the dominant role in our homes, either us or Rover. Both we and Rover will be happier when we take the dominant leadership role.

Dominance has nothing to do with being mean or being physical with Rover. It has nothing to do with being aggressive. Leadership is about understanding Rover's needs and establishing a relationship with him based on mutual respect, trust and love. When we do that we will have the relationship with him we really want. We'll have a happy dog and a happy family.