



Becoming the Leader of the Pack

Most dogs assume a neutral or submissive role toward people, but some dogs will challenge their owners for dominance. A "dominant" dog may stare, bark, growl, snap, or even bite when you give him a command or ask him to give up a toy, treat, or resting place. Sometimes even hugging, petting, or grooming can be interpreted as gestures of dominance and, therefore, provoke a growl or snap—and this is true even though your dog may still be very affectionate and often solicit petting and attention from you.

To understand why your dog behaves in these ways, it's important to know some things about canine social systems. Animals who live in social groups, including wolves and domestic dogs, establish a social structure called a dominance hierarchy within their group. This hierarchy serves to maintain order, reduce conflict, and promote cooperation among group members. A position within the dominance hierarchy is established by each member of the group, based on the outcomes of interactions between themselves and the other pack members. The more dominant animals can control access to valued items such as food, den sites, and mates. For domestic dogs, valued items might be food, toys, sleeping or resting places, and attention from their owner. For your home to be a safe and happy place for pets and people, it's best that the humans in the household assume the highest positions in the dominance hierarchy, particularly with dominant dogs.

Use the following techniques—none of which require a physical confrontation with your dog—to help you gain some control over your dog and establish yourself as the "pack leader":

- Spay or neuter your dog to reduce hormonal contributions to dominance. Understand that, after a mature animal has been spayed or neutered, it may take time for those hormones to clear from the body. In some cases, long-standing behavior patterns may continue even after the hormones or other causes no longer exist.
- Use a training technique called "Nothing In Life Is Free" to establish your leadership in a safe, non-confrontational way. This technique requires your dog to "work" for everything he gets from you. Have your dog obey at least one command (such as "sit" or "down") before you pet him, give him dinner, put on his leash, or throw him a toy. If your dog doesn't know any commands or doesn't perform them reliably, you'll first have to teach him, using positive reinforcement techniques, and practice with him daily.
- Don't feed your dog people food *from the table* and don't allow begging.
- Ignore barking and jumping up.
- Don't allow your dog on the furniture or your bed unless invited to do so by you, because this is a privilege reserved for leaders. If your dog growls or snaps when you try to remove him from the furniture, use a treat to lure him off. Otherwise, try to limit his access to your bed and/or furniture by using baby gates or a crate, or by closing doors.
- Always remember to reward appropriate behavior.
- Consult your veterinarian about acupuncture, massage therapy, or as a last resort, conventional medication. If you have a holistic veterinarian, he may prescribe the temporary use of holistic remedies to be used in conjunction with behavior modification.