

# Pack it in! The myth of the alpha dog

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“He’s an alpha dog”, “She’s dominant”, “You have to be pack leader”

I’ve heard all these phrases this week – as I did last week and the week before! You only have to turn on the TV or look at the internet to find them, along with someone telling you that your dog is really just a wolf, needs a firm pack structure and that you have to be in charge otherwise your dog will think he is the pack leader and take over the household with disastrous consequences.

The problem is that all of this is nothing more than pop psychology based on false science. It continues because it is an easy concept for people with little knowledge to grasp and despite being totally disproven, there are enough grains of truth in there that people buy into it – and it is their dogs (and their relationship with their dogs) that suffer.

## **So let’s debunk this one!**

First of all, dogs and wolves are totally different species. Think about humans and gorillas and you can kind of see what I mean! The best knowledge we have now is not that dogs descended from wolves but instead that dogs and wolves both descended from a common ancestor. Dogs threw their lot in with man and evolved to live harmoniously with us and prosper from our success, while wolves developed as a wild species whose very existence depended on keeping as far from us as possible.

Even if (despite science!) you do still think that pack theory is a thing for dogs, its worth considering that wild wolves do not live in packs where a domineering pack leader constantly keeps everyone in line with displays of aggression and violence while everyone else battles for position (as was originally thought). Wild wolf packs are families. The alpha pair are indeed in charge but that is because they are the parents and all the rest are (quite rightly) guided by them.

Dogs do not live in a pack structure. Left to their own devices away from man and with adequate resources, they form loose social groups but not structured packs.

## **So for dogs, there is no such thing as an alpha dog – or a pack leader.**

As for dominant dogs... The behaviors that most people think of as being ‘dominant’ are generally something totally different. Aggression is one of the behaviors that people categorize as a dog showing dominance. Aggression however is a high risk behavior designed for one purpose and one purpose only – to make bad stuff go away. ‘Bad stuff’ for dogs are things that make them feel frightened, threatened, worried or stressed.

Dog to human aggression is fear of humans or what they will do.

Dog to dog aggression is fear of strange dogs or what they will do.

Resource guarding (guarding food or anything important to the dog) is fear of someone taking your stuff away.

And sometimes aggression happens because a dog is sick or is in pain.

That means that the dogs that most people say are ‘dominant’ are actually the ones that are the most scared, frightened, worried, or anxious. And the methods used by people who don’t know any better to ‘stop a dog being dominant’ are generally things that make the dog feel even worse. Crazy isn’t it?

So let’s stop using pop psychology to try and understand our dogs, and instead spend time watching and really understanding them. Think about how they feel and how you can make them feel better.

## **Don’t try to be a pack leader – try to be a better guardian.**

If you need help with your dog’s behavior, look for a trainer who uses positive reward-based methods (where the dog gets rewarded for doing things right, not punished when he does things wrong). If they mention the phrases ‘pack leader’, ‘dominance’, ‘alpha’ – or suggest equipment that causes your dog pain such as choke chains, prong collars, electric shock collars etc – find another trainer. Your dog is your best friend – make sure you are his.