

Both Ends of the Leash

Peace, Patience, & Pack Politics Forget “Alpha”—the rules of group living apply to all

Patricia B. McConnell

My client looked at me as though I’d suggested her dogs learn to ice skate. Actually, I’d recommended that she resolve some of the chaos in her multi-dog household by putting the dogs in a back room when company first enters the house. “Are you kidding?” she asked. “I couldn’t do that. The dogs would tear the door down.”

Oh my. How often I’ve heard something similar from someone with a pack of dogs whose sheer numbers have begun to cause problems. Perhaps the trouble is a bit too much excitement when visitors come to the door—and you’re beginning to notice an alarming decline in friends who are willing to stop over. Perhaps there’s tension between two of your dogs, and you’re starting to worry about where it might lead.

The fact of the matter is that living with multiple dogs is different from living with just one. A single dog may cause no end of commotion when the doorbell rings, but nothing compares to the frenzy that a group of dogs can create when they get overly excited. A riot at a soccer game may come close, but at least sports events have umpires and security guards. (Let’s give thanks that dogs don’t spend the evening drinking beer before company comes over.)

Those of us who are stupid in love with dogs, and who are lucky enough to have a bunch of them, know how much joy there is in living with more than one dog. Their interactions with one another are better than the best television show; they take a bit of pressure off us humans to be the “be-all-and-end-all” of their lives; and although I find this advantage harder to express, there’s something comforting about living within a group, especially if you have your own bathroom.



Needless to say, group living can have its problems. It’s harder to get your dog’s attention, much less cooperation, when there are other dogs around to provide social companionship. Some dogs simply aren’t suited for living in a group, and are more high maintenance in a pack than when alone. Others develop blood feuds with one another so serious that the only silver lining is a dog’s inability to build nuclear weapons in the backyard.

Not surprisingly, there’s a plethora of advice out there for handling problems that arise within a multi-dog household. The traditional advice, which still appears all over the place, emphasizes the importance of deciding which dog is “dominant” in your house and treating that individual like royalty. Feed her first, let her out of the door first—do whatever you need to do to make it clear that she’s more important than any of the other dogs. This advice is based on the observation that the most aggression in a wolf pack occurs when the hierarchy has broken down. The idea is that, if you support the “leader,” you’ll stabilize the pack. As is often the case, a little bit of information can be a dangerous thing, and the “support the alpha” advice is usually not useful—and can be harmful—to those of us who live with three Shelties and a Terrier rather than a pack of wolves.

First, dogs don’t behave exactly like wolves, for which my sheep are very grateful. Additionally, and most importantly, there can be plenty of aggression in a “stable” wolf pack if the alpha male or female is a bully. The wolf researchers I know say that the most important influence on levels of aggression in a pack is the personality of the lead male and female. Some

pack leaders are calm, benevolent souls who use force only when absolutely necessary, and don't tolerate the excessive use of it by others. Other high-status individuals are nervous bullies who rule the pack with terror and intimidation. (Any of this sound familiar in our own species?) I've consulted on countless cases in which my clients were told to "support the alpha" and ended up exacerbating the problems, not fixing them. Some dogs respond to preferential treatment as if it were a license to bully the others; I've seen homes in which lower-ranking dogs took their lives in their paws, so to speak, just to get a drink of water.

This is not to say that status is irrelevant in a group of dogs. Of course status is relevant—otherwise dogs wouldn't greet one another with tail up or tail down, and it wouldn't matter so much exactly who pees where and whose urine gets deposited on top of someone else's. But I doubt that status hierarchies are as important to dogs as they are to wolves, and most importantly, they shouldn't be that relevant in your living room when someone rings your doorbell. We don't raise our children to believe that they can get anything they want because of social status (well, at least most of us don't, and those of us who do rarely admit it), so why should we raise dogs that way?

My advice to people who live within a pack of dogs is to teach them that you get what you want by being patient and polite, not by throwing your weight around. Want to go out the door into the backyard? Please pause at the door instead of clipping your human behind the knees and ramming into the geriatric Golden Retriever with whom you share the house on your way out. Want some attention from your human? Please be so kind as to sit or lie down while he or she finishes petting another dog. If you forget yourself, as we all do from time to time, and push the other dog away in order to hoard the attention, you'll be gently reminded to back up, lie down and stay for a bit while all other dogs get special pets under the chin. Excited because there's company at the door? Ah yes, aren't we all, but now that we've grown up we've learned to inhibit ourselves so that we're able to wait politely in another room, or perhaps greet the newcomer a bit more like tea-drinking fans at a tennis match and less like a beer-swilling crowd at...(insert your raucous sports event here).

This may seem like a tall order if you're reading this while your five dogs are at the window barking and leaping at a passing skateboarder. But it's actually well within your grasp if you remember three things: First, it takes growing humans about 20 years to learn to control their emotions (Okay, some people never do—I encourage them to move to the back room of life), so be patient with your dogs and think in terms of months and years when training, not days and weeks.

Second, turn each exercise into a fun game in which your dogs learn that being patient and polite really pays off—they get extra yummy treats and toys and attention for working so hard. It won't hurt to reinforce yourself for being patient and polite either, something that we too have to practice when our dogs are swirling hysterically at our feet. With lots of positive reinforcement for all of you, good habits become effortless, just like brushing your teeth or checking your rearview mirror.

Third, start by teaching each exercise to only one dog at a time. Ironically, but understandably, the more dogs we have, the less time we spend with each as an individual. As much fun as it is to live within a pack, you need a relationship with each and every one of your dogs, and you can't get that by always working with them as a group. Go out of your way to work with each dog separately, even if it's just for five minutes. If your dog doesn't listen to you when you're one-on-one, why on Earth would she listen when she's in a crowd? Find out what level of distraction each dog can handle and use positive reinforcement to push the boundaries, every so slowly, one at a time.

Sure this will take a while, but if you didn't like working with your dogs, you wouldn't have so many, right? It's a rare dog that doesn't love to learn, and most of our dogs seem to adore this kind of training. Besides, just like kids, they love getting even tiny amounts of one-on-one attention from you. Who knows what benefits might ensue—after you've achieved the level of peace and harmony you'd like at home, perhaps you could turn your skills to fans and players at basketball games....?

Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, is an animal behaviorist and ethologist and an adjunct professor in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as the author of numerous books on behavior and training.

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