

Alpha, Beta, Does it Matter?

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You may have heard. The crystal clear concept of dominance hierarchies is not so crystal clear. At least not when it comes to our pet dogs. And, to the benefit of all people that keep company with dogs, scientists around the world have taken an interest in studying the behavior of *Canis familiaris*, the domestic dog.

What have we learned? Perhaps most important, it is clear that dogs, though evolved from wolves, behave much differently than wolves. This means that even if wolf groups did revolve around establishing and maintaining strict hierarchies, which by the way they don't, it should not be assumed that dogs would do the same.

We have also learned that dogs behave differently toward people than they do toward other dogs in many contexts. We should not therefore presume that dogs would consider the humans that care for them to be part of a hierarchy.

Why does it matter?

Ascribing an underlying motivation of attempting to gain alpha status or achieve dominance can be dangerous. First, there is a negative impact on the bond between the dog and the people in his household -- owners feel threatened by the thought that their dogs are challenging them. How dare he bite the one that feeds him? Furthermore, new studies have shown that managing any aggressive behavior in a confrontational manner yields increased aggressive behavior. Yet threatened owners routinely rise to the "challenge" by delivering an equal or greater threat.

Clinical application

Presenting complaint: Aggression toward family members

There are several common triggers for aggression toward family members. People may be threatened when they attempt to take valuable items or food from their dog. Aggression might be exhibited when a dog is booted out of bed, or when harshly reprimanded, particularly following a prior confrontation.

An early hypothesis was that these dogs, being pack animals, were attempting to climb to the top of the social ladder, to achieve alpha status if you will. However, the most common clinical presentation of dogs that exhibit aggression toward family members does not support this hypothesis. Wouldn't you expect that, in order to maintain a controlling role in a social group, a dog should exhibit a calm, confident posture reflecting an animal that maintains dominance status in a particular relationship?

Yet the alleged alpha wannabes that present clinically do not typically exhibit calm, confident postures. They instead exhibit conflicting body postures. When clients describe recent events, they describe body postures that reflect fear. Many dogs do not even exhibit noticeable signals at all. Without attempting to communicate intent, they react by biting. Biting would not be a successful strategy for attaining a respected leadership position in a social group. Impulsive aggressive behavior instead suggested underlying pathology such as anxiety.

Presenting complaint: Aggression among household dogs

When it comes to aggression among conspecifics, the concept of having an alpha dog or pack leader does make more sense. Dogs apparently are not compelled to organize their social groups as hierarchies. In some households, there are clear leader dogs. They probably did not earn leadership through indiscriminate biting.

There are other equally harmonious households where there is no clear dominant or alpha dog. It appears that aggressive interdog interactions often have an underlying etiology not necessarily related to rearranging dominance. Fighting often begins, and more importantly is maintained, by anxiety. Sometimes the aggressor exhibits impulsive aggression, reacting quickly and out of proportion to a trigger. A victim may be abnormally fearful, unintentionally reinforcing aggression. As noted in the description of aggression toward household people, careful observation reveals postures reflecting fear.

Clinical implication

When aggression toward household people was considered to be a consequence of a dog's motivation to dominate family members, it seemed reasonable for therapy to focus exclusively on helping owners gain control, to show power. If instead the aggression stems from conflict or anxiety, then treatment strategies should be very different. The focus should be on reducing anxiety by improving communication and creating a more predictable environment for the dog.

Similar principles apply to dogs that behave aggressively toward other dogs in the household. A traditional treatment has been to attempt to support a particular dog as "dominant", to rearrange or create a hierarchy. Yet, if one or both dogs are behaviorally abnormal, then this approach may not be appropriate. It can even be dangerous. Instead any underlying pathology should be managed. A treatment plan should be designed to reduce anxiety and manage triggers associated with conflict.

Do no harm

It is important that veterinarians educate their clients regarding the current standard of care in managing aggressive behavior. Confrontational training methods should be discouraged. There is no rationale for advising owners to strive for dominance over their dogs. Nor should owners be asked to behave as though they were dogs, by barking, growling or biting. (P.S. --- dogs can tell the difference. And P.P.S. — if they were conflicted before, they will probably be even more confused when the family human starts to growl!)

It can be hard to change old ways. Television demonstrations of confrontational training methods and discussions on outdated pack theory can be persuasive. Indeed, whenever any therapy is implemented, some patients will respond.

However, there is considerable risk to engaging in a contest based on “might makes right”. First, most owners do not wish to confront their dogs. Equally important, most owners do not have the skills to fight successfully. Corrections may be poorly timed. The intensity of the punishment might be too high or too low. All these factors serve to increase fear and thereby increase the frequency and intensity of aggressive behavior in their dogs. People and dogs will be unnecessarily injured. When all the fighting is over, the dog’s motivation to bite remains unchanged. Aggression began because of confusion and aggression continues because of confusion.

Recommendations

1. An integral part of managing aggression within the home is the education of dog owners so that they are able to accurately identify and understand the implication of their dog’s postural changes.
2. At the same time, owners need to learn which of their own gestures are perceived as threats by their dogs. They can announce their intentions and teach dogs to relax in the face of these perceived threats.
3. Dogs can learn to predictably respond to cues, reducing the need for physical confrontations. For instance, they can be taught to remove themselves from provocative situations.
4. Instead of focusing on offense and defense, implementing a strategy that teaches communication skills may be sufficient for a successful outcome.
5. Pathological anxiety may need to be addressed through relaxation exercises and in some cases pharmacological intervention.

Conclusion

We still have a lot to learn. Our understanding of dog behavior increases daily thanks to studies based on direct observations of dogs, and a greater understanding of behavioral pathology. Regardless of what we learn, there will never be a reason to abandon the humane treatment of our patients or to risk fracturing the human-animal bond in the name of therapy.