

Leadership Versus Dominance

by Nicole Wilde, CPDT

I recently attended a lecture given by a self-styled “dog psychologist” on how to improve your relationship with your dog. One of the main points made was that dogs don’t need a loving leader, but rather, a strong leader who uses “domination.” Owners were advised to use the alpha roll (forcing the dog on his back, holding him down and staring until he submits) to “show the dog who’s boss.” I was saddened to hear this regurgitation of the old, strong-arm techniques in this enlightened day and age. The truth is, you can be both a strong *and* a loving leader.

Techniques like alpha rolls and scruff shakes are purportedly based on the behavior of the dog’s ancestor, the wolf. Studies done in the wild years ago reported that wolves use the alpha roll to discipline and control other pack members. In later years, those studies were disproved. What ethologists observed was that when a wolf wanted to dominate another, he would “muzzle pin,” that is, place his own muzzle, mouth wide open, teeth bared, gently over the muzzle of the other. The pinned wolf would then roll over and submit *voluntarily*. That’s an important distinction. In fact, if a wolf forcefully slams another to the ground, teeth around his neck, staring hard, chances are he means to kill that animal. Is that really the message you want to send to your dog?

If your dog has aggression issues, using force will only make the problem worse. It may look for the moment as though the issue has been solved, because the dog stops the aggressive display immediately. Of course he does; you’re physically stronger, and you’re threatening him. His reaction is an act of self-preservation. In reality, you’re only suppressing the aggression, and causing stress that will assuredly resurface—and it won’t be pretty. It may reappear as other seemingly unrelated behavior problems, or even more intense aggression. Besides, what happens if one family member uses force, but the others are not as physically or psychologically capable of doing so? I can tell you, because that’s the case with many families I’m called in to work with. When the person using the force-based techniques (often the adult male in the household) is away, the dog challenges the ones he might have a chance of dominating—usually the wife or kids.

Another fascinating fact from the world of wolves is that the “alpha” or top-ranking wolf does not need to prove a thing. Good alphas rule with a calm air of dignity. They are assertive when necessary, but are not bullies. At Wolf Park, a research and educational facility in Indiana, those alpha wolves who ruled with a heavy paw were quickly deposed by other pack members. Those who ruled wisely ruled longer. It’s actually the middle-ranking, wanna-be alphas who do all the squabbling. They have something to prove. You shouldn’t.

So remember: Be kind, be fair, be consistent. Be a good leader. Your dog will love you for it.