

## Alpha This, Alpha That

By Maureen Ross, M.A.

**Note:** Dr. Ian Dunbar, who has spent nine years studying the social behavior of dogs, founder of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers and continues to mentor many of us with his books, DVD's, advice and good sense of humor, has helped to clarify misconceptions about Alpha Theory for many of us.

A 30-year study was conducted by Dr. Frank Beach. It is very difficult to locate information on this even on the internet. More studies have been carried out by many, but most notably, for me, Dr. David Mech, Jim and Jamie Dutcher and Dr. Ray Coppinger.

It makes sense to clarify the concept of Alpha because we have so many dog trainers and behaviorists teaching classes to families, who then role-model to their children. If there were such a thing as "alpha" for domestic dogs, then "children" certainly couldn't safely be one. Read on--

The original alpha/dominance model was born out of short-term studies of wolf packs done in the 1940s. These studies were a good start, but later research disproved most of the findings citing three major flaws:

1. Being short-term studies, the researchers focused on the most obvious, overt parts of wolf life-- hunting. The studies drew conclusions about "wolf behavior" based on a small percentage of wolf life / living.
2. The studies observed what are now known to be ritualistic displays and misinterpreted them. Unfortunately, this is where the bulk of dominance theory came from and was used by many as foundation for writing books and training dogs.
3. After the studies, the researchers made cavalier extrapolations from wolf-dog to dog-dog to dog-human based on their "findings."

In my opinion this is where the bulk of the "dominance model" and "myth" stems. Following that came compulsory training, often using adverse and cruel methods that made no sense to the dog, and certainly could not be used on a wolf. Being the dog's ALPHA presented a kind of "image" that some still enjoy. If we are the "alpha" then our dogs will respect us like they would a wolf alpha— not! Most of this information has been disproved if one simply takes the time to observe pack behavior, research and practice more positive approaches to teaching-- the FAMILY DOG.

After 20 years of training dogs, behavior coaching and "living" with packs of dogs, I can confidently say that I believe it to be a myth that we are a dog's alpha. More appropriate and understandable is **"we are a dog's pack leader and/or parent" in the human-dog household.** Let's explore further--

**Alpha Rolls:** Early researchers saw this behavior and concluded that the higher-ranking wolf was forcibly rolling the subordinate to exert his dominance. Not exactly. If you observe closely with wolves or domesticated dogs, it is actually an "appeasement ritual" instigated by the SUBORDINATE wolf or dog. The subordinate offers his muzzle, and when the higher-ranking wolf "pins" it, the lower-ranking wolf voluntarily rolls and presents his belly. There is NO force. It is voluntary. A wolf would flip another wolf against his will ONLY if he were planning to kill it. Domesticated dogs may flip on there own and/or flip another dog while playing—very different context.

## ***Take a moment to imagine what a forced alpha-roll does to the psyche of our dogs?***

The truth is dogs may be DNA wolf, but they are domesticated dogs, and act it too. This changes things for dogs and the humans. By the way, you can not successfully stare a wolf down in the wild. The likelihood is, unless they are contained, you would not get near one.

**Saying "I want to learn how to interact with my dog so I'll learn from the wolves" makes about as much sense as saying, "I want to improve my parenting -- let's see how the chimps do it!"**

Dr. Frank Beach performed a 30-year study on dogs at Yale and UC Berkeley. Nineteen years of the study was devoted to social behavior of a dog pack. Here are some findings—:

- 🐾 Male dogs have a rigid hierarchy.
- 🐾 Female dogs have a hierarchy, but it's more variable.
- 🐾 When you mix the sexes, the rules get mixed up. Males try to follow their constitution, but the females have "amendments."
- 🐾 Young puppies have what's called "puppy license (puppy breath is well recognized by older dogs)." They have a license to do most anything. Females are more tolerant of puppy license than males are--
- 🐾 The puppy license is revoked at approximately four months of age (teething). At that time, the older middle-ranked dogs teach the pup what is acceptable and not-- psychologically torturing it until it offers all of the appropriate appeasement behaviors and takes its place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The top-ranked dogs ignore the whole thing.
- 🐾 There is NO physical domination. Everything is accomplished through psychological harassment. It's all ritualistic.
- 🐾 A small minority of "alpha" dogs assumed their position by bullying and force. Those that did were quickly deposed. No one likes a dictator.
- 🐾 The vast majority of **alpha dogs rule benevolently**. They are confident in their position. They do not stoop to squabbling to prove their point. To do so would lower their status because...
- 🐾 Blustery-middle-ranked animals squabble. They are insecure in their positions and want to advance over other middle-ranked animals.
- 🐾 Low-ranked animals do not squabble. They know they would lose. They know their position, and they accept it.
- 🐾 **Alpha" does not mean physically dominant. It means "in control of resources.** Many alpha dogs are too small or too physically frail to physically dominate, but they have earned the right to control the valued resources. An individual dog determines which resources he considers important. An alpha dog may give up a prime sleeping place (or toy) because he simply couldn't care less.

**So what does this mean for the dog-human relationship? *High-Ranking – Life Rewards—***

- 🐾 Using physical force of any kind reduces your "rank." Only blustery middle-ranking animals, insecure in their status, squabble.
- 🐾 If you are proactive enough to control the things your dogs wants and needs, by definition you are in a sense the "alpha"—*if you really need to use the word.*

- 🐾 **To be "alpha," control the resources (high-ranking, life rewards):** This does not mean silly stuff like allowing my dog on the bed or to precede me through a doorway. It means making good use of the natural, high ranking, and survival items, a dog needs like food, toys and attention.
- 🐾 Make resources contingent on behavior—in the relationship between you and your dog. Does the dog want to be fed? Good-- ask him to sit first. Does she want to go outside? Sit first. Does the dog love to greet people? Sit first. Want to play? Sit first.
- 🐾 Train your dog. This is the dog-human equivalent of the "revoking the puppy license". Use positive training and the mantra: you do something for me, and I'll do something for you.
- 🐾 On a continuum, incrementally phase in socialization, desensitization (sights, sounds, smells) and behavioral development, and life enrichment.
- 🐾 Children, women, elderly and handicapped people are capable of training a dog. Very few people are capable of physical domination.
- 🐾 Reward acceptable, desired and deferential behavior, rather than pushy behavior and do so PROMPTLY. After 3-seconds of ANY BEHAVIOR is too late.

I have 4-dogs. My dog's well-being is a priority to me. They are companions, family members and work with me. All sit for their dinner, at their respective dinner stations. The older dogs get fed first, which I realize is contrary to wolves in the wild, where the older or sick would likely wait and/or be killed or die. That's my choice as pack leader and we don't live in the jungle.

The first dog to sit gets treated. Pulling on lead stops the pleasure of walking. Doors don't open until dogs sit. And, my dogs get lots of love and hugs.

Leadership is a huge responsibility. Providing for our dogs-- food, water, vet care, wellness, social needs, security, enrichment and interaction—(our dogs are social creatures) is not to be taken lightly. Our job as responsible dog owners is to learn about our dogs, and be good pack leaders. It is similar to being a good parent—role model. Dogs may fear, but they do not respect a dictator. Plus, what kind of relationship is that anyway? Why have dogs?

***In a recent article in the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) Chronicle, Dr. Ray Coppinger -- a biology professor at Hampshire College, co-founder of the [Livestock Guarding Dog Project](#), author of several books including *Dogs: A Startling New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior, and Evolution*; and an extremely well-respected member of the dog training community -- says in regards to the dominance model (and alpha rolling)--***

***"I cannot think of many learning situations where I want my learning dogs responding with fear and lack of motion. I never want my animals to be thinking social hierarchy. Once they do, they will be spending their time trying to figure out how to move up in the hierarchy."***

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References

Dr. Frank Beach--

Dr. Ian Dunbar—[www.dogstardaily.com](http://www.dogstardaily.com)--

Dr. Raymond Coppinger—Co-author, Lorna Coppinger, *DOGS: A Startling New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior, and Evolution*

Dr. David Mech—[www.davidmech.com](http://www.davidmech.com)

Jim and Jamie Dutcher—[www.livingwithwolves.org](http://www.livingwithwolves.org)

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