

Who's in charge here, anyway?

Why don't we get any respect?

Q: Help! Our one year old dog doesn't seem to have any respect for us. He's been to obedience class but he seldom obeys our commands. He's always grabbing our hands or head butting us when he wants something. He's become very demanding. He never seems to get enough attention even though we give him attention all the time. He even body slams us out of the way at the door so he can get outside first. He's a very loving dog but we need to get him under control. He's too big to be telling us what to do!

A: You're absolutely right! It sounds like your dog has a dominance problem and is on his way toward becoming the leader of your family – his pack. He has also reached the age of adolescence where, similar to a teenaged child, he's testing your limits. Now is an ideal time to nip these problems in the bud.

A dog's social system has a pecking order. The leader of the pack is the "alpha." He (or she) gets the best of everything – the best food, the best place to sleep, the best toy, etc. The alpha also gets to be first in everything – he gets to eat first, to leave first and to get attention first. All the other dogs in the pack respect the alpha dog's wishes. An alpha dog doesn't ask for what he wants, he demands it. He lets you know in no uncertain terms that he wants his dinner, that he wants to go out, that he wants to play or be petted and that he wants these things right now.

Your family is your dog's pack. Most dogs fit easily into the lower levels of their human pack's pecking order and don't make trouble. They do what they're told and don't challenge authority. Other dogs don't fit in quite as well. Some are natural leaders, others are social climbers always looking for ways to get a little closer to the top of the family ladder. These dogs can become problems to an unsuspecting family that's not aware of their natural pack instincts. Some families unknowingly encourage their dogs to take over the pack. They treat their dogs as equals, not as subordinates. They give them special privileges like being allowed to sleep on the bed or couch. They let them get away with disobeying commands. In a real dog pack, only the alpha dog would get this kind of treatment.

Dogs need – and want – leaders. They have an instinctive need to fit into a pack. They want the security of knowing their place and what's expected of them. Most of them don't want to be alpha – they want someone else to give orders and make decisions. But if his humans don't provide that leadership, the dog will take over the role himself. To reclaim your family's rightful place as leaders of the pack, your dog needs to learn how to be a subordinate, not an equal. He knew this once, as a baby puppy, because his mother taught him. She showed him very early in life that she was alpha and that he had to respect her. It's time to refresh his memory!

Before you can remove your dog from his alpha position, you must become alpha and earn his respect. Alpha is an attitude. It involves confidence, dignity, intelligence, an air of authority. A dog can sense this attitude almost immediately – it's how his mother acted toward him. Watch a good trainer or obedience instructor. They stand tall and use their voices and eyes to project the idea that they're capable of getting what they want. They're gentle but firm, loving but tough, all at the same time. Most dogs are immediately submissive towards this type of personality because they recognize and respect alpha when they see it.

Stand up straight with your shoulders back. Walk tall. Practice using a new tone of voice, one that's deep and firm. Don't ask your dog to do something – tell him. There's a difference and he knows it! As alpha, you're entitled to make the rules and give the orders. Your dog understands that instinctively.

Since your dog has been used to getting what he wants on demand, it's likely to take more than just a change in your attitude to make him mind better. He's been getting a free ride for a long time but you're going to teach him that from now on, he has to earn what he gets. This will be a shock to his system at first but you'll be surprised how quickly he'll catch on and that he'll actually become eager to please you.

Your dog already knows the command SIT. Now, every time your dog wants something – his dinner, a trip outside, a walk, some attention, anything – tell him (remember don't ask him, tell him) to sit first. When he does, praise him with a "Good Boy!" then tell him OKAY and give him whatever it is he wants as a reward. If he refuses to sit, walk away and ignore him. No sit, no reward. If you don't think he understands the command, work on his training some more. If he just doesn't want to obey, ignore him – don't give him what he wants or reward him in any fashion.

Make him sit before giving him his dinner, make him sit at the door before going outside, make him sit in front of you to be petted, make him sit before giving him his toy. If you normally leave food out for him all the time, stop. Go to a twice daily feeding and you decide what time of day he'll be fed. Make him sit for his dinner. If he won't obey the command – no dinner. Walk away and ignore him. Bring the food out later and tell him again to sit. If he understands the command, don't tell him more than once. He heard you the first time. Give commands from a standing position and use a deep, firm tone of voice. To keep him from body-slaming you at the doorway, put a leash on him. Make him sit and wait while you open the door and give him permission – OKAY! – to go out.

Alpha dogs are used to being fussed over. In a real dog pack, subordinate dogs are forever touching, licking and grooming the alpha dog. It's a show of respect and submission. Until your dog's attitude has improved, cut down on the amount of cuddling he gets. When he wants attention, make him sit first, give him a few kind words and pats, then stop. Go back to whatever you were doing and ignore him. If he pesters you, tell him NO! in a firm voice and ignore him some more. Pet him when you want to, not just because he wants you to. Also, don't get down on the floor or on your knees to pet your dog. That, too, is a show of submission. Give praise, petting and rewards from a position that's higher than the dog.

Don't allow wrestling or rough-housing with your dog. These games encourage dogs to dominate people physically. In a dog pack or in a litter, these games are more than just playing – they help to establish pack order based on physical strength. Your dog is already stronger and quicker than you are. Rough, physical games prove that to him.

Where does your dog sleep? Not in your bedroom and especially not on your bed! Your bedroom is a special place – it's your den. An alpha dog thinks he has a right to sleep in your den because he considers himself your equal. Until your dog's alpha problems are fully under control, the bedroom should be off-limits. The same goes for sleeping on furniture. If you can't keep him off the couch without a fight, deny him access to the room.

If your alpha program is successful, your dog should start looking to you for directions and permission. He'll show an eagerness to please. Watch how your dog approaches and greets you. Does he come to you "standing tall," with his head and ears held high and erect? It may look impressive and proud but it means he's still alpha and you still have problems! A dog that accepts humans as superiors will approach you with his head slightly lowered and his ears back or off to the sides. He'll "shrink" his whole body a little in a show of submission. Watch how he greets all the members of the family. If he displays this submissive posture to some of them, but not others, those are the ones who need to work harder on their own alpha techniques.

Once your dog has begun to accept this new way of life and his new position in the family, you should take him through another obedience course with a qualified trainer. Obedience training is a lifelong process. Obedience commands need to be practiced and incorporated into your daily life. In a dog pack, the alpha animal uses occasional reminders to reinforce his authority. Certain commands, like DOWN/STAY, are especially effective reminders of a dog's place in the family pack order and who's really in charge here. A well-trained dog that's secure in his place within the family pack is comfortable and confident. He knows what's expected of him. He knows his limits and who his leaders are. He's free to be your loving companion and not your boss!

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