

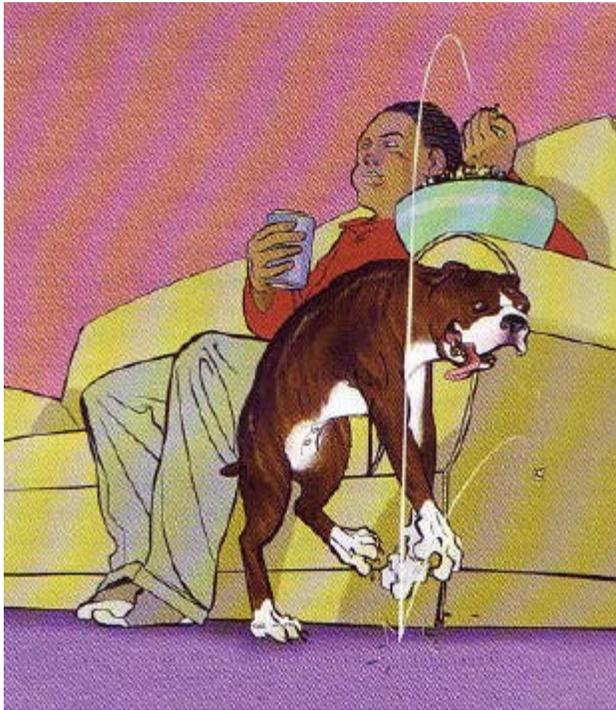
# Defusing Dominance

by Gillian Ridgeway

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## Redefining the word and the behaviour

Given a chance, most dogs will seize the day. They love a great opportunity. In fact, dogs spend a good deal of time waiting for the perfect opportunity. By now, you may be wondering what opportunities dogs could possibly be waiting for. My reply is... any and all that provide something they want.



If a treat falls to the ground, they'll pick it up. If there is an opportunity to solicit play, they'll take it. If growling at dogs tends to keep them away, they may choose that tactic. They probably see these as favourable opportunities to take advantage of the moment.

Why, then, do we often label this behaviour as "dominant"? Dogs that help themselves to the chicken potpie carelessly left on the counter are often referred to as dominant. Puppies normally scavenge for food and once that behaviour has been reinforced once or twice, it prevails. Dogs are motivated by this reinforcement; over time, the behaviour becomes inherent. Jumping on people, growling to keep guests off the couch, barking aggressively at the sound of the doorbell are simply behaviours that have been reinforced. Are our dogs dominant or are they just goofy with no manners?

### Terminology

The term "dominant" is often misused, perhaps because it's become common language and therefore acceptable. It's time to rethink our use of the term and how it applies to our dogs. According to the dictionary, "dominance" means having control or authority. Are we all under the impression that our dogs want control over us? I'd hazard a guess that they're far more interested in having control over themselves, and accessibility to the resources they consider important.

The dominant member of a family is often described as influential and prominent. This term is not used to describe a bully or someone with no manners. It might be possible that our dogs seek control over us for their own gain - such as by sitting up at the table for a morning piece of toast - but to think they're seeking control for the sake of control seems far-fetched.

Dominance is rarely the case with puppies. A pup's expression of fear or anxiety in new circumstances may seem like aggression to the untrained eye, but it's usually just the pup showing he feels unsure. He may even bare his teeth or snap. At that point, many owners will chastise the little guy, believing they need to show him how to behave. Instead, the fear may increase, the scene will escalate and there are no winners. The owner feels betrayed and the puppy may lose confidence.

Breeders do a great job of sorting out puppies and letting the new owners know their characteristics. However, if the docile pup goes to a home where he's allowed free reign, it stands to reason he'll seize this opportunity and may end up more confident, which would be unnerving to the family that wanted a couch potato.

The other side of the story is punishment, often given out of fear that you have an aggressive puppy, that he might bite the kids or won't fit into your lifestyle with this type of behaviour. This is understandable, but with education we can all calm down and learn to understand our dogs, not automatically try to overpower or intimidate them. That being said, I strongly believe that positive doesn't mean permissive. All dogs need guidelines and rules, enforced in a clear, calm, fair manner.

### A better designation

Instead of using the outdated term "dominant," let's take a closer look at how dogs behave. By using the term "assertive," we might be able to understand our canine friends better and therefore help them understand what we expect from them.

"Assertive" means clearly stating your position or belief, and insisting on your rights and opinions. We all know dogs like that. Those that have guidance can be a pleasure; those left to their own devices may very well end up in a shelter. It's up to us, our dogs'

guides and leaders through life, to explain that getting what they want, when they want it, is not an option.

Control your dog by controlling the resources; do away with making your dog submit and showing him who's boss. Physical force or intimidation to overpower your dog is old information. Intimidation through use of aversives may work for a while, but over the long run can produce an unmotivated, robotic dog. Dogs should be fun and interesting and even a bit mischievous. That is what we love most about our dogs.

Living with an assertive dog will provide challenges. Assertive dogs insist on what they want and we need to spend time overseeing them, to help channel those tendencies. Our dogs need our guidance and understanding. As a good trainer friend of mine once put it - it's not only easier, but more productive, to teach instead of punish. Let's not dominate our dogs, but show them we're above that.