

Dealing With Dominance

Beth Bradley

The word “dog” covers an amazingly wide range of sizes, types, and temperaments. Throughout history, humans have valued different characteristics in dogs depending on the role they want the dog to fulfill. For example, dogs used for guarding property, livestock, and their human companions were bred to be big, strong, and assertive because these traits made them good at their intended work. These same traits sometimes result in a breed, or a dog within the breed, being labeled as innately aggressive. In fact, dogs with dominant temperaments are not naturally aggressive. When problems with apparent aggression occur, it is usually because of inadequate socialization, careless interaction with other dogs and people, or a lack of training and leadership.

Starting Right

It is important with all dogs to socialize them when they are young, but with breeds that tend toward dominant temperaments, it is especially important to instill appropriate behaviors and attitudes early. The key socialization period in a puppy’s development is between 7 and 12 weeks. During this period puppies are separated from their mother and littermates to begin life in a new home. At this age, a puppy’s main drives are to eat and to play. Some pups develop a fear response to new surroundings and objects. For other puppies, the social motivation to make contact with new surroundings, objects, humans and other animals may very well overcome any wariness. Either way, controlled socialization with other animals, humans, and other dogs is vital at this stage of development. Puppies should experience gradual and careful exposure to new environments and experiences.

It is most important that pups at this stage learn to establish strong relationships with humans vs. other dogs. Especially during this stage, your puppy should get the majority of attention, affection, and interaction from you. Establishing yourself as the primary provider for all his physical and social needs is an important foundation for establishing your leadership role.

- Bring your puppy everywhere that you can, but be careful not to bring him to loud places or areas where there is too much going on. Don't push him into situations that will make him fearful.
- Always have your pup's crate with you. If he is afraid, you can place him in his crate and he can watch from his "safe place" until he becomes accustomed to the people and noise. Once he is desensitized, you should be able to bring him out comfortably
- Stay alert to situations and surroundings when you are out with your pup so that you can prevent negative socialization meetings.
- Don't allow your pup to be passed from person to person. The feeling of insecurity from the potential of being dropped will make meeting new people a negative instead of a positive experience. Instead, allow your pup to remain on the floor and let him choose to approach as many or as few people as he is comfortable with. Remember, as humans we are giants to young puppies.
- As your puppy grows, your role as his leader must continue. A fully-grown dominant dog is a big responsibility. You must ensure that your dog looks to you for guidance in his interactions with people and other dogs.

Appropriate Interaction

I own and train German Shepherds. They are a dominant breed, but my dogs are well-mannered and social. They are well-socialized and well-trained. However, with that said, I rarely allow people or dogs I do not know to interact with my adult dogs. My dogs have confidence in me as their leader. They trust that I will not allow other dogs or people to challenge or confront them. Because I cannot control how unfamiliar dogs or people will approach or interact, my golden rule for the safety of my dogs and others is this: If you are not a permanent fixture in my life, you do not get to say hello to my dogs.

I'm going to ask you to envision a scene. You are walking in the park and suddenly a stranger approaches and grabs your hand. Smiling and laughing, he shakes your hand vigorously. You try to pull away, but the stranger seems oblivious. He pulls you in for a hug. At this point you are probably truly alarmed. Although technically all the actions are "friendly," in context, they feel threatening. You would most likely push the stranger away. Does this make you aggressive? No. Your response is a natural reaction to the inappropriate overfamiliarity.

Similarly, when dogs are faced with inappropriate greetings, they react. You cannot control how strange people or dogs will greet your dog, therefore, you should not allow passing people and dogs to interact with your dominant dog. As we have seen, even overtly "friendly" interactions can, in the wrong context, be perceived as a threat. While a dog with a submissive temperament may roll over or offer some other placating gesture, a dog with a dominant temperament will react with a forceful response. He may growl, snarl, or "air bite." You have not protected him from this perceived threat, so he will take action to protect himself. Worse yet, the next time he sees a strange person or dog, he will anticipate that he will need to handle a challenge. He may begin reacting to approaching people or dogs at a distance. He is on guard before an introduction is even made.

As your dog's leader, it is your responsibility to manage introductions with people and other dogs so that they are appropriate and non-threatening. Your dog should never feel that he must assert himself to protect himself.

Introducing New People

When dealing with a dominant dog, it is especially important to ensure that people understand and respect the subtleties of "dog-ese" before introductions are made. More often than not, human beings greet dogs as if it the dogs were toddlers. They make direct eye contact, bend in close to the dog's face, and reach over the dog's head to rub or pet. Most dogs find this intimidating. (For the record, so do most toddlers.)

Here's what a dominant dog sees in this kind of greeting from a stranger.

- Direct eye contact is a challenge.
- Bending in close is confrontational.
- Reaching over the head is an attempt to dominate.

A dog with a dominant temperament will respond poorly to this kind of greeting and may snarl, growl, or snap in an attempt to get the person to back off.

Ideally, when bringing a new person into your dog's life, you should take a few walks together. These walks allow your dog to take in the person's scent and become comfortable with him or her before any touching happens. Soon, you should see your dog showing signs of happy anticipation when the person arrives. Then, you can allow your dog to "say hello." The person should speak to the dog in a calm voice, turn slightly to the side to avoid the "face to face" confrontation, and pet the dog from the side. As long as your dog has shown no negative behaviors, your dog's new friend can seal the deal with a treat!

Introducing New Dogs

Introducing two dogs should always be handled carefully, but when you have a dog with a dominant temperament, proper introductions are especially important.

- Dogs should meet on neutral territory.
- The dogs should be walked in heel position with their owners. This establishes that the people, not the dogs, are in control of the situation.
- No sniffing of faces or private areas should be allowed. Direct face-to-face contact is generally considered confrontational. And while it is a common perception that "butt sniffing" is just how dogs say hello, it is not a casually accepted greeting. Like face-to-face contact, it crosses a line.
- Dogs should be walked together at least a dozen times over a period of a week or more before they are allowed to interact. Parallel walking is a bonding activity and it builds positive associations between the two dogs.
- Observe initial interactions carefully. Watch for raised hackles, pulled lips, or flattened ears that may indicate either of the dogs feels threatened or challenged by the other.
- Don't allow the dogs to get overly rambunctious in their initial interactions. Some dogs nip or bite when they get overexcited. Keep the first few play sessions short and controlled. As the dogs become more familiar with each other and less likely to misinterpret lively behavior as challenging behavior, you can allow them to play for longer periods.

Conclusion

A dog with a dominant temperament needs a leader that he both respects and trusts. Consistent training and thoughtful socialization will establish the right attitudes and behaviors in your dog. Then, it is up to you to continue to build and maintain his confidence that you will not allow people or other dogs to challenge or dominate him. However, if you loosen up and allow random interactions, you run the risk that perceived challenges will destroy your dog's confidence in your judgment. You also run the risk that your dog could have a strong reaction to an encounter with a dog or person he perceives is crossing the line. Imagine your own reaction if a stranger suddenly rushed up and kissed you on the lips. You shouldn't be surprised if your dominant dog has a similarly strong and forceful reaction to the canine version of such aggressive familiarity.

About Beth Bradley

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains "cross-trained" companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles and championships in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland. Although Fyte is the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition, Beth and Fyte ranked third among the US competitors and posted scores that placed the US team in the top ten. Competing with Beth nationally, Fyte earned the title of USCA IPO 2015 Vice Champion.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies, television, and theater, with recent credits including appearances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Blacklist*.

CONTACT BETH

Phone (201) 247-8472

www.dog-trainer.biz www.servicedogsandautism.com www.crosstrainedk9.com

Follow Beth on Twitter [@BethBradley1968](https://twitter.com/BethBradley1968)