

Training Tips for a Dominant Dog

Beth Bradley

Your dominant dog believes he is the leader of the pack. In the absence of a stronger leader, he is making his own decisions about how to act when he is excited, bored, hungry, or scared. Unless you nip it in the bud, this situation has the potential to cause big problems. For the sake of safety and sanity, you must become the leader your dog needs you to be.

Reclaiming leadership from a dominant dog goes far beyond basic obedience. The following tips and techniques are proven to successfully communicate leadership, but they are effective only if you are committed and consistent. You must follow through 100% of the time, even when it seems tough.

Alpha Actions and Attitudes

Alphas establish and maintain control of the pack through their attitudes and actions. When your attitude and actions reflect the confidence and consistency of an Alpha, your dog will learn to respect your leadership.

- The leader makes all the decisions—including when it is time to play, time to eat, and time to get attention.
- The leader communicates decisions calmly, clearly, and firmly. Alphas do not scream, plead, cajole, wheedle, ask questions, or discuss.
- Commands are not repeated. Although Alphas communicate more with their body language than with vocalization, the principle remains the same. They communicate once. They don't repeat.
- Commands that are not heeded the first time are followed immediately by a correction. Don't confuse your dog by making him think he will sometimes get away with double commands.
- Corrections are strong enough to be effective. When an Alpha corrects a pack member, the subordinate dog immediately defaults to submissive behavior. When you correct your dog, your correction should be strong enough to stop the behavior for that training session. If your dog repeats the action, the correction was not strong enough and the respect has not been given to you. The dog will continue the misbehavior.

These attitudes and actions should govern all your interactions with your dog. In addition, incorporate the following rules for various aspects of life with a dominant dog.

Safety

When interacting with your dominant dog, follow these rules to ensure your safety and his when you control and correct him.

Until you have solidly established yourself as the leader, your dominant dog must always wear a collar and leash when you are together. The leash should be in your hand before you give a command so that you are ready to give a swift correction if needed. (Remember to remove the leash when you leave your dog in his crate or at home alone so that it doesn't create a safety hazard.)

Do not grab, push, pull, or lift your dog. Do not physically move your dog into the correct position or place him for obedience. Always use the leash and collar for correction.

Space

Clear, consistent rules about the use of space in your space in your home will reinforce your leadership position with your dominant dog.

Do not allow your dog to sit or sleep on couches, chairs, or beds.

Preferred seating is for the leader—and by extension, the other humans in the home.

If your dog guards your bedroom, he cannot sleep in your bedroom.

Your dog needs to know that he has neither rights nor responsibilities related to this space. Use a gate to prevent your dog from entering the room during the night, or have him sleep in his crate outside the bedroom. If he is good in your bedroom, he must still sleep in his own bed on the floor.

Food

Food is a key component of leadership for dogs. The leader controls who eats what, and when.

When you are eating, place your dog in a down/stay. Alphas do not allow subordinate pack members to pester them while they are eating.

Make your dog wait for your permission to eat. In a pack, the others do not eat until the Alpha "gives permission" by walking away from the food. When you feed your dog, place him in a sit or down/stay in one corner of your kitchen at a small distance from where he will eat. Then, put his food on the floor on the spot where he will eat. Walk away from his bowl. After you have walked away from the bowl, release him to the food. If he breaks as you place the food on the floor, correct with the leash. He must hold the stay until you release him to his food. Then leave the room. The Alpha doesn't stay around to watch the others eat.

Attention

How and when to give attention are some of the most difficult guidelines for people to follow. We want to believe our dogs will respond positively to our outpouring of love. However, with dominant dogs, giving too much attention or giving attention at the wrong times, can actually cause an increase in problem behavior.

Never respond to your dog's attempts to start play or to get affection.

Only the Alpha initiates playtime or other interaction.

Ignore your dog around the house. Praise him and talk to him only after his response to a command. Alphas do not lavish attention on individual pack members. If your personal attention is rare enough to be special, your dog will value it more highly.

Do not bring affection to your dog by going to him to pet or talk to him.

Always have your dog come to you and respond to a command before you pet, praise, or talk to him. He will learn that obedience to commands is a prerequisite for the attention he craves.

Do not allow your dog to demand attention the moment you walk through the door. Immediately attach his leash to his collar, then ignore him. If he jumps, whines, barks, or otherwise tries to control your attention during this time, use a firm tone and put him in a down/stay. Later, you can call him to you, give a command, and give him some attention.

Never allow your dog to jump up on you. Jumping is his way of asserting his control. Subordinates do not jump on the Alpha. If your dog jumps, respond like an Alpha. Stand tall with your eyes facing the ceiling. Make no eye contact. Say nothing. If the behavior continues, correct with the leash.

Training

With all dogs, clear and consistent rules are the key to successful training. However, there are some specific guidelines for effectively training a dominant dog.

Do not use treats to reward obedience to commands. Your dominant dog must learn to respond to you because you are the leader, not just because he's decided he wants a treat.

Practice the down/stay frequently. The down/stay is a calming exercise and will teach your dog to be quiet and composed. Your dog should maintain a down/stay for 30-45 minutes per session. Always put your dog in a down/stay when you are eating, watching television, or reading.

Don't limit your leadership to "training time." It's always training time! Every single interaction you have with your dog influences his belief in you as a leader. Don't give a command unless you are prepared to back it up.

Conclusion

If your leadership has been inconsistent and your dominant dog has developed bad habits, then reclaiming a true leadership role will take time and persistence. You may be tempted to bend the rules occasionally because you are worried that your dog won't feel loved. In fact, the most loving thing you can do for your dog is to ensure that he feels safe, secure, and stress-free. Babying your dominant dog will not make him feel this way. Strong, competent leadership will. Be a leader so that your dog can relax and be a dog.

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, championships, and honors in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials.

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 and television, with recent credits including *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Blacklist*.

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