

What to Do

When Your Dog Challenges Your Leadership

Beth Bradley

Many canines live in social groups. Although domestic dogs do not live in actual “packs” like their wild ancestors, dogs do instinctively look for their place in the hierarchy of a group. Most dogs look for a leader to follow. Their instincts tell them that their survival depends on a strong leader. In your home, you should obviously be the leader of the social group to which your dog belongs. Nonetheless, there will be times when your dog challenges your leadership. It is vital that you quickly and decisively demonstrate that your leadership is not up for grabs. Your sanity, your dog’s security, and the safety of you both depend on your ability to be a leader.

Reasons Your Dog Will Challenge Your Leadership

Although most dogs prefer to follow a leader, there are circumstances under which some dogs will try to assume the leadership role.

Lack of Leadership If you are bringing a new adult dog into your home, you may have to do some retraining—especially if the new dog is challenging you. A new dog that is challenging you probably did not get appropriate training in his previous situation. Now that he is in your home, you will need to show him that he no longer needs to, nor should he, make his own decisions.

Developmental Changes As puppies grow and approach sexual maturity, they experience hormonal and physiological changes. Although the timing may vary from breed to breed and dog to dog, you can expect your dog to go through a “testing phase” when he is about 7 months old. He will challenge your leadership to see if you are still worthy of the Alpha role. Paradoxically, although pups at this stage challenge leadership, most don’t really want to be the leaders. Although your pup may push boundaries he previously respected, he will feel safer and more secure when you remain consistent and firm. In a wild pack, the canine Alpha immediately and definitively reprimands a subordinate who challenges him. The correction makes a strong enough impression on the challenging dog that the challenge is not repeated. Use a correction that makes a significant enough impression on your pup that he does not test the same boundary again. Your consistency will reassure him that you are still a strong and competent leader and will minimize the number of challenges he will attempt. His raging hormones will cause him to make some crazy mistakes, but your calm, consistent, and firm leadership will keep him safe and on track until he regains his sanity.

Dominant Temperament Some dogs have a dominant temperament and may occasionally try challenging your leadership throughout their lives. Although you can't change a dominant dog's temperament, you can minimize the frequency and duration of these challenges. A dominant dog is more driven than other dogs to get his own way, but even a dominant dog feels safer and more secure if he has a strong, consistent leader. The sooner you establish yourself as that leader, the better off you and your dog will be.

Signals That Your Dog Is Challenging You

You may not immediately recognize the signs that your dog is challenging you. Some of the behaviors may seem cute or funny at first. Others may seem relatively harmless. However, you should never ignore a sign that your dog is relaxing his respect for your leadership.

- Refusing to come when called or coming slowly and with detours
- Ignoring or responding slowly to commands
- Claiming and/or "hogging" a place on the couch, bed, or other furniture
- Refusing to get off of furniture
- Jumping on you
- Bumping or knocking into you when you enter the yard or house
- Mouthing
- Pulling on the leash or refusing to walk calmly
- Demanding food or play
- Barking for attention

Other signs that your dog is challenging you, such as growling, snarling, or biting, are unmistakably clear. If your dog challenges your leadership in aggressive ways or by showing aggression to you, other people, or other animals, you should consult a professional to address the issue. Do not invite injury by trying techniques you've seen on television or read about on social media. Rather, work with a professional trainer who can evaluate your dog in person, make recommendations based on your individual dog, and teach you the safe and effective way to correct your dog and establish or re-establish your "Alpha" role.

Conclusion

Whether you are establishing leadership with a puppy or responding to challenges from your new adult dog or an adolescent pup, the key is to be firm and consistent. Training your dog involves much more than teaching him to recognize the words *sit*, *down*, *come*, and *heel*. Until he acknowledges your leadership, he will view these as choices rather than commands. When your dog challenges your leadership, you must firmly clarify for him that he must control his impulses and rely on your decision making under all circumstances. Once your leadership role is clear, the rest of the training can follow.