

My Dog is Dominant

By Laura Tyler

Here's a dictionary definition of dominant: to dominate is to influence, control or rule by superior power or authority; also to occupy the most prominent position in or over. The label "dominant" does not give us a clear description of what the dog does that make us think he is being dominant. Dominant says what the animal is (emotional) rather than what he does (behavioral).

In order to change a behavior we need to know what that behavior looks like. The use of labels keeps us going 'round and 'round. Why does my dog do that? Because he's trying to dominant me. What are you going to do about it? I have to show him whose boss! How do you do that? I dominate him. Now we're really getting into trouble.

We can more easily change a behavior if we know what that behavior looks like. When a dog owner describes their own dog as dominant; based on the above synonyms what exactly does that mean? What does it look like when your dog is dominating you? Is he being overbearing (label) or assertive (label)? How does he do that? Is he forceful (label)? How does he do that? What does that look like?

I've had some people say that their dog plays a bit rough with other dogs but once he's made his point the other dog backs down. They think it's because he's being dominant. Hummmm..... Is that dog being dominant? Now we're getting closer to the truth. There's a pretty good chance that he's being a bully (label). This type of dog likes to set all the rules for play. And he likes to win every time. His personality fits the type as overbearing and likes to be in control. This type of "dominant" dog needs superior management and lots of training for impulse control. Is it who he is or what he does that leads us to label him as dominant? We can train a dog to offer better impulse control. We can manage our dog to make sure he doesn't have the opportunity to bully other dogs.

It's really not OK to allow a dog to intimidate or bully other dogs just for fun. The effect of this type of behavior can have long lasting consequences for both dogs. The bully "domineering" dog learns that he can intimidate other dogs. The brain chemical release of this type of behavior serves to "self reinforce" and this type of behavior usually escalates over a period of time and becomes worse.

The down side for the dog who is being bullied is that he may very well become less social and more fear reactive. Now he barks and lunges and wants other dogs to go away before it's too late. He's trying to communicate fear and increase the distance between himself and the approaching dog. Over time he becomes reactive toward all dogs. Has he become a bully? Not in the least! He's developing defensive behavior to ward off the bully before the pain starts! And he can generalize that behavior to include all dogs, not just dogs that resemble the "bully" who started it all in motion.

So, in truth, the label "dominant" can hinder us from managing and changing the very behavior that led us to define the dog. It's up to dog owners to introduce proper training and management before this behavior escalates to physical or psychological violence toward another.

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