

An excerpt from

Positive Perspectives 2: Know Your Dog, Train Your Dog

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Be a Benevolent Leader

Dominance has become something of a dirty word in many dog-training circles, and for good cause. Behaviorists once used the word to appropriately define a relationship between two individuals in a social group. However, over recent decades, the word has been warped and twisted to inappropriately describe an assertive dog's personality. It is also often applied to misinterpretations of normal, non-assertive dog behavior.

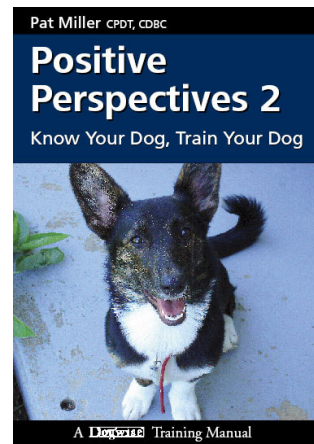
Sadly, "dominance" been used as justification to inflict a litany of punishments on dogs, especially those dogs who react defensively to force-based training methods. In the past, if a dog responded to compulsion-based training or punishment by defending himself with a growl or a snap, this was interpreted as "dominance" and defiance. In addition, many natural, normal dog behaviors such as the desire to sleep on soft surfaces (beds and sofas), jumping up in greeting, and an eagerness to dash through doorways to get to the great outdoors, were also interpreted by some people as "dominant" behaviors that needed correcting.

According to these outdated theories, a dog's *owners* should be the only dominant figures in the household, and they were exhorted to establish dominance over their dogs by being forceful. We were cautioned by our trainers and by the dog-training books of the day not to tolerate any of your dogs' resistance—and warned that if we failed to fiercely squash any opposition, disaster would ensue. We were urged to leap to the offense if a dog objected to our rough handling, and told to apply violent techniques such as scruff shakes and alpha rolls if our dogs dared resist.

Some trainers went even further, advocating extremely abusive methods such as hanging a dog by the choke chain and leash, "helicoptering" him in the air at the end of a chain and leash, or holding his head in a hole filled with water until unconsciousness for behaviors ranging from something as mild as digging to as serious as aggression.

We're Past That

Fortunately for dogs, modern behavioral science has moved past the simplistic notion that a dog owner's absolute dominance will solve all (or any) of a dog's behavior or training issues. This is especially true in cases involving a dog who "fights back" when physically hurt or frightened. Severe physical punishments may force a dog to fear the person meting out the punishment, or become violent in return.



Today's positive trainers recognize the importance of the relationship between dogs and their owners, and realize that, while force-based methods *can* effectively train dogs, they also risk damaging the relationship between dog and owner, sometimes beyond repair. Gentle, humane training methods are as effective as pain-based techniques (if not more so), and can accomplish the same training goals without force and the attendant risk of negative reactions such as fear and aggression that are possible whenever force is applied.

Learning to Lead

A good leader doesn't need to be violent—she simply needs to create an environment where it is easy and rewarding for her followers to comply with her wishes, and difficult for them to make mistakes. She helps them succeed. Attending a positive training class with your dog is a good place to start establishing yourself as a benevolent leader to your dog. A training class helps you and your dog understand each other better, and your trainer can help the two of you problem solve if the road gets bumpy along the way.

A successful leader/owner controls valuable resources (food, toys) and shares them with her dogs generously and judiciously. Appropriate behaviors earn rewards. Inappropriate behaviors do not. If resources are consistently awarded on the basis of desirable behaviors, and withheld in the presence of undesirable behaviors, what dog in his right mind would not choose to be well-behaved? It's no different than teaching a toddler that he has to say "Please" to get a cookie rather than scream "Gimme!" at the top of his lungs while his face turns blue.

Author **Pat Miller** is at the forefront of the force-free, positive dog training phenomenon in the U.S. She is past President of APDT, the world's largest professional group of dog trainers, operates her own training facility, and is a popular columnist for *Whole Dog Journal*, *Your Dog*, and *Popular Dogs* magazines. Pat is the author of two other successful training books *Positive Perspectives. Love Your Dog, Train Your Dog* and *The Power of Positive Dog Training*. Pat lives on a farm with her husband Paul and a menagerie of rescued dogs, cats, and horses in Hagerstown, Maryland.