

Dogs Follow the Friendliest, Not the Alpha (Op-Ed)



By Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, Duke University (October 18, 2013)



A dog is not a wolf.

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Never let your dog walk first through a doorway. Don't let your dog win tug-of-war. To establish yourself as the pack leader, flip your dog on its stomach and hold it by the throat.

This is some of the advice from the so-called "top" dog-training school, where the philosophy is that owners should establish a dominant relationship over their dogs to ensure that their canines are obedient.

This philosophy originates from the idea that wolf packs have strict dominance hierarchies where the wolves compete for dominance, but are held in check by the alpha male and female. Since dogs evolved from wolves, that dog school encourages you to act like the alpha wolf.

The problem from a scientific perspective with the "dog in wolf's clothing" approach is that it assumes that the social system of dogs is the same as for wolves. However, domestication changed the social system of dogs. If people want to see how dogs behave without human interference, the best model is actually feral dogs.

Feral dogs are dogs who have been domesticated but have returned to a wilder existence. These include dogs that live completely independently from humans, like dingoes, and stray dogs that survive by scavenging human garbage. Many populations of feral dogs have not been intentionally bred by humans for generations, and are a great model of how dogs would behave without humans.

In wolves, with the exception of unusually large packs, a single breeding pair is dominant to everyone else. This pair uses their dominance to suppress the breeding of other pack members. Dominant female wolves are aggressive all year round, and use unprovoked attacks to prevent other females from mating. Male wolves become most aggressive during the mating season. Younger and subordinate pack members are usually the offspring of the breeding pair from previous years. Juveniles are forced to stay with their parents because meeting another wolf pack before they become fully grown is dangerous.

Feral dogs have a different system. While some feral dog groups have a dominance hierarchy that predicts priority to food and mates, this hierarchy is not as strict as in wolves. There is no dominant pair that leads the group. Instead, the leader of a feral dog pack is the dog that has the most affiliative relationships. When the pack decides where to go, they do not follow the most dominant dog — instead, they follow the dog with the most friends.

And yet, the top-dog approach is still prevalent in the training world. In one of the few experiments testing that theory, researchers assessed how long it took a group of golden retrievers to obey commands both before and after either winning 20 games of tug-of-war or losing 20 games of tug-of-war. Some members of the top dog school suggest that you should not let your dog win a tug-of-war match, because your dog will think they are dominant to you.

Regardless of whether the dogs won or lost the tug-of-war match, they did not show an increase or decrease in dominance toward their human partners.

Dogs are not wolves. It is time people started treated them as a unique species with a mind and social system very different from their ancestors.