

Pack Leadership and the Family Dog (alpha this and alpha that)  
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Okay, what is going on with the entire alpha this and alpha that? Lately we are being blasted with research, articles and internet you tube's on whether our family dogs need an alpha, doesn't need an alpha, or can humans even be conceived as alpha because dogs aren't dumb. They know we aren't wolves or dogs.

I am glad it's getting attention because there are more people hanging up their dog-trainer shingles. Depending on their learning experiences, it can make a difference to a family dog that is having difficulty, whether or not someone knows the difference between dog and wolf, alpha and leadership.

As a behaviorist with several behavioral organizations (human and dog), the human family counselor doesn't talk about alpha, but leadership, parenting and guidance. For dogs, it's splashed all over that they must have an ALPHA because dogs in the wild have an Alpha. Do they? How many field works like David Mech or Dr. Jane Goodall actually live with in the wild anymore? Let's explore this. Forming your own opinion, ask whether it is important to the family dog in the sense of right or wrong, alpha or leader.

I often visualize the dogs laughing because their needs and response to us is usually much simpler than we humans realize. Humans need to research. They need to be "right" and have it documented. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. The paradigm helps us to evolve, making it BETTER for the dogs, not more confusing or giving humans the opportunity to try out "alpha" on a dog (me alpha ... ugh).

Many historical training books touted "yes, we must be alpha, roll them over, because that's what their mother or a wolf would do." Really? I've seen this in slow motion many times in person and on video, where we can freeze-frame. Nothings absolute, but most of the time, the subordinate dog will roll over on their very own. Wolf pups will roll-over, following by a cluster of submissive gestures including head turning, yawning and lip-licking. No-one is picking them up and throwing them over.

*How could any family or first dog owner know this if some trainer is saying: "you must be alpha." Someone could get hurt. Enough said .. err on the side of caution, there are better ways to inform family dog owners ...*

The dominant question asked by families, trainers, veterinarians and vet techs is "shouldn't there be an alpha or pack leader in the house and who should it be?"

*Response: "No, they don't need alpha as much as effective leadership, parenting and guidance. It depends on what they know and understand, and how well they can commit to, apply and stay safe while practicing it. And, can everyone in the family accomplish this?"*

Where children are involved, the goal first goal is safe interactions. As a counselor, I have been in situations where the dog is in more in danger of losing his or her sanity / spirit / life than the family.

There are as many varying opinions and behavior articles on this topic as there are breeds and breed mix dogs. My curiosity leads me to the same paths as other dog enthusiasts. I want to know what Cesar Milan or Victoria Stillwell would say, but I can't ask them while watching "The Dog Whisperer" or "Me or the Dog". I'm wise to know that in between filming-pauses, the dog in the tub getting his neck pinched by the Cesar Claw (like mother dog would do), is being "clawed and calmed" off-camera so that the next take we see on NatGeo is of a calm dog getting a bath ... bravo. I like Cesar but I'm a behaviorist, not a family dog owner sitting their wide-eyed and excited going "wow, look what Cesar did in 3-minutes." Even Cesar shares that there are "things people should never attempt on their own, without supervision."

I have been living with and training dogs since I was a kid. I am still learning—the dogs are teaching me *that the definitions, rights or wrongs* aren't as important to them as does it make sense and when can I eat, sleep, pee, poop, play and be a hug-nut.

Yes, dogs need pack leadership, but so does everyone. Dogs are not wild wolves. They are domesticated, by us and by their choice from thousands of years ago, probably out of comfort and survival. Why hunt if I can eat at the tribal fireplace.

If we didn't have rules and regulations, like traffic lights, every street corner would be a mess of blood, guts and metal. As dogs are DNA wolf, humans are DNA chimpanzee, but we aren't sticking for termites, at least most of us aren't. Evolution is a growing concept.

It is helpful to define a few definitions that apply to behavior, whether with humans or dogs (psychology 101). Okay, I will offer before you a fast – forward to my opinion that YES, absolutely dogs need pack leadership. Alpha is something better left to the field workers in the wild and wolves. I'll elaborate more later ... because I realize there is a lot of controversy about Alpha, but not really. The fact is anyone who REALLY knows what Alpha is for a wolf or dog, would know that it cannot apply to a family pack. Leadership and parenting can.

Behavior - A broad term to connote all the responses, overt or implicit, muscular or glandular of an organism. *Notice the word broad ...*

Behavior Management – The proactive and/or responsive use of conditioning paradigms and enrichment strategies to create, modify or extinguish behavior as an integral part of a comprehensive care program. *Paradigms are evolving theories that change as does the subject.*

Conditioning - The process by which a response is made stronger (increasing the probability of its recurrence in a similar situation) by pairing a reinforcer with a response. *Notice that this is not specific to positive or negative behavior. It implies any behavior.*

Okay, let's continue to clarify a few definitions that all dog trainers must pass if they are going to take the CPDT exam (Certification of Professional Dog Trainers).

### **The Four Principles of Operant Conditioning (BF Skinner's ABC's)**

In the real world of family dogs it usually is not meaningful for trainers or behaviorists to ask families whether classical or operant conditioning is in operation because things aren't that clear-cut. Both types of learning play a critical role in any situation, but are helpful only if the receiving party can understand what you are explaining to them.

Picking up your dog's leash for a walk may elicit Classically Conditioned (CO) feelings of excitement and anticipation in your dog which cause him to come running. This is a great way to train a dog. If the dog wants and enjoys doing something, and knows the cues, it is a powerful learning experience. The behavior of coming is rewarded with a walk (operant conditioning or OC). OC is based on antecedent (something happens), behavior (they respond) and consequence (which can be good or bad). This is the request, response, reward of dog training.

Positive Reinforcement – The dog's behavior makes something good happen! Positive, in behavioral terms, means something is added. Reinforcement (reward) means the behavior increases. We want this to be GOOD BEHAVIOR, so that's the BEHAVIOR to pay the MOST ATTENTION TOO. *In general, humans aren't that good at this. We tend to wake-up when the dog has done something WRONG.*

*Example: A dog sits, you give him a healthy treat, smile, say GOOD. She sits on her own, bravo!*

Negative Reinforcement – The dog's behavior makes something bad go away. Negative means something is taken away. Reinforcement increases the behavior.

*Example: Your dog is on the sofa; you say get off and look at him angrily. He gets off. You smile. Dog lightens up on the leash, you start walking again. Otherwise, stop. A child does his homework and Mom stops nagging.*

Positive Punishment – The dog's behavior makes something bad happen. Positive means something is added, punishment means the behavior decreases (or does it?). PP usually involves physical punishment like electric shock, knee in chest, smack under muzzle. It can also set a precedent for a dull, non-trusting or fearful relationship with a dog.

*Example: Your dog muzzle punches you with muddy paws and you knee him in the chest, hard enough so that he never does it again! Oops, you missed ... not effective ... he did it again. Okay, I'm being a bit prejudice here because I do not think punishment is effective in the long*

*term. It ceases a behavior that will likely re-appear again out of your presence. Plus, it doesn't reach the goal ... that is WHAT DO YOU WANT THE DOG TO DO? SIT!*

Positive trainers seldom use PP, if at all. PP can work with some dogs, but dogs that are positively punished may learn to fear the punisher, can become aggressive, may simply shut-down in training and are often reluctant to learn new behaviors for fear of being punished.

*To understand how fear blocks creativity and learning for any species, take a moment to imagine yourself telling a story to someone you love and trust. Now, imagine telling the same story to someone who, for whatever reason, makes you uncomfortable. Instead of warmth, energy, and creativity, you will probably feel a desire to close down. When we feel unsafe, our creativity / learning flow stops. Alternatively, when we feel safe and eager to learn, our creativity unfolds without conscious effort.*

**Negative Punishment** - The dog's behavior makes something good go away. Negative means something is taken away, punishment means the behavior decreases.

*Example: The dog jumps up on you with muddy paws, so you turn your back to her and step away. She continues to jump; you turn your back and walk away. Her behavior jumping up made something good --- your attention --- go away. When the dog calms down and sits, you stay present. Training tip with safe dogs: Hold some delicious in your mouth (the end is visible), like low fat cheddar fish crackers or cheese, turkey or high-value dog treat. Ask your dog to sit. She does NOT, so you swallow the treat. When the dog learns to sit, wait, you can drop the treat into her mouth or on the floor.*

### **Classical Conditioning (Pavlov's Salivating Dogs)**

CC can have a major impact on behavior depending on how badly a dog or human wants something.

*Example: Suppose you love pizza and you haven't eaten for 24 hours. Your friend orders a favorite pizza with all the toppings you love, and then offers you \$100 dollars not to eat any. You happen to need money more than pizza to buy dog food. You take the \$100 dollars while beginning to drool and breathe heavy at the **sight and smell of the pizza**. Personally, I think only a crappy friend would do this, who wouldn't be my friend a moment longer ... but you get the picture ...*

Classical Conditioning draws its success in training from the senses, in this case, olfactory (which is very powerful in dogs) and visual. Pavlov's dogs saw the person who brings the food and began salivating. The reflexes are involuntary ... they simply happen to all of us, at certain times and depending on desperation.

Okay, if you are still with me at this point, you are going to get a reward. Not really, but the anticipation got you drooling didn't it? You can however, reward yourself for taking

the time to learn. I'm having a Corona Light with lime, while my Newfie pup is chewing on my foot ... "leave it and chew this (Kong)." We are now playing the leave-it / freeze-off to the next exploration, freeze (how about the remote?) game.

## **What Determines a Dog's Behavior**

Genetics loads the gun, environment pulls the trigger and beyond that we have to make choices that are flexible and applicable to the individual dog and family lifestyle. Realizing that we are different species is an important first step and knowing that *changes in our lives effects our dogs too. A new puppy or baby in the family changes the living style of the dog.*

Dogs are intelligent and extreme body language experts. They choose behaviors that satisfy their most important need at that time. They learn through role-modeling and trying things out. Don't we all? It is basic Maslow's Hierarchy that humans strive for survival with food, clothing and shelter being at the top of the list. If we are starving, naked and freezing, we can't really think about the next step of survival much. If we feel helpless, without choices, we can't learn and thrive; we can just exist, not very exiting.

Dog's are affected by life-factors including illness, adoption, too much-too soon syndrome, lifestyle and family-life changes. All of these affect a dog's well-being. In addition to obvious needs like safety, food, water, the entire scale of "social" needs is an important factor for dogs. In my opinion, socialization is and always will be on the top of a well-rounded dog's list.

*Example: Being able to please its pack leader is as important for most dogs as eating. If eating is the dog's only pleasure or activity, and it is given free-style, then food will become more important than the pack-leader who provides it. Use food as a training tool with the Mantra: you do something for me, and I'll do something for you ... i.e. sit, good, here's your food..*

## **Pack Leadership**

Whether you are a dog owner, have a professional degree as a behaviorist, or 80 years of experience truly means squat to a dog. Dogs will judge your leadership qualifications on your behavior and how it fits with the dog's natural gene-coded picture of what a good pack leader is suppose to look and act like. A good beginning is oftentimes out of our control, especially if we adopt. As a parent or pack leader, what we can do is recreate a good beginning by starting exactly there-- the beginning-- teaching.

## **Pack Leadership Qualifications**

If a human resource manager wrote a job description seeking a "great engineer" what does that tell us? Not much. A job description would be detailed, applicable to the organizations' needs and specific to the specific engineering job (design, electrical, aerospace, radar). It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that we cannot hand-

out or expect every dog to fit into a specific job description or behavioral intake criteria either.

Some well-defined – researched common features are taught by thousands of trainers, management consultants and behaviorists. One of my favorites for humans is [www.davidco.com](http://www.davidco.com), Making it Work and Getting it Done. I believe it begins with self-management before we can manage dogs.

In people management, there is room for positive reinforcement (praise, performance review, salary increase, etc.) as well as negative reinforcement (reprimands, lousy performance evaluation, termination, etc.). An organization cannot provide good leadership without providing both. Whether it works or not has little to do with the specific method, but a whole lot to do with the quality of the management structure of the company, its fundamental workplace, value system and how it is applied to employees.

Good leaders are those who are organized, flexible, and can *stimulate the wanted behavior from their subordinate's point of view*. In other words, getting the dog or human to think and proactively accomplish a task, while feeling good about it too.

Good leaders do not restrict themselves to a one-size-fits-all approach. Neither should trainers, behaviorists or dog owners. *Both punishing bad behavior and rewarding good behavior are reactive and can condition a dog to respond a certain way, whether we like it or not*. If we do not like how our dogs are responding, then we need to first look our lives and their health, take the for a wellness check to rule out health issues, then begin the journey of training and/or behavior modification.

The goal is to be proactive by educating and providing structure, supporting safe social environments and organizing meaningful activities that are applicable to the individual dog and living environment. It varies for everyone, and for every dog.

### **Alpha This and Alpha That**

Globally, much is being analyzed in the dog world and disseminated via internet by behaviorists and organizations about whether dogs need an alpha, have an alpha or are alphas --- like their predecessor the wolf. Similar to the “raw food diet”, we are being inundated with information about what is best for the family dog’s health, well-being and training. The good news is we have choices! The bad news is, we have so many that some people are crossing into overwhelming land. It can be stressful trying to figure it all out. Then, as soon as we do, someone says we should change it and do this. Well, guess what? You don’t have to do anything that doesn’t feel right. Listen to your intuition. There no need to angry, stressed, simply take a breath and decide if it makes sense in the context of your lifestyle.

You can find extensive research on wolf (and dog) behavior. One of my favorites is [www.davidmech.com](http://www.davidmech.com) who is a seasoned biologist that has studied wolves (field-work)

for years. Another is a DVD “Living with Wolves” Jim and Jamie Ducher. There are many. Turid Rugaas Calming Signals: On Talking Terms with Dogs and Sarah Kalnajs The Body Language of Dogs are worth the watch to view packs of dogs and pauses in behavior so you can actually see the behavior. In real-life, with our dog packs, it often happens too quickly to learn anything. The behavior is over and the test is a story.

You can find a myriad of definitions of the word ALPHA including, but not limited to:

1. The first letter of the Greek alphabet
2. The beginning of anything
3. The name assigned to the brightest star in each constellation-- alpha centauri
4. Designating or of the socially dominant member of a group, especially of a group of animals like alpha male or alpha female ...

What is important to know for family dogs is that not one size fits all. Most dog owners do not know what ALPHA means in relation to a wolf pack, much less can they effectively transfer what they read in a book or see on TV into real life situations. Plus, it is dangerous for children to witness this, because children surely aren't perceived as an Alpha or Pack Leader to a dog.

Yes, wolves in the wild have a hierarchy that includes alphas, betas, omegas and a bunch of blustery middle rankers as well. They must have to survive. However, the domesticated dog has been engineered and conditioned to accommodate living with humans in families. In the domesticated dog pack, most dogs are blustery middle-rankers. The loudest, pushiest bullies are seldom alpha, leaders or want to be.

Imagine this dog (or human leader) trying to secure food, shelter and survival by blowing the pack's cover, and thus valuable resources, with a bull-horn out in the wild. Truth is, secure leaders avoid this “find our location”. Secure leaders are calm, but assertive. They teach clear boundaries, that can be followed by each member, and let the members who don't know, but in a way that is applicable to the species. Humans may point a finger at a teen that comes home late, read the riot act to them, maybe ground them, then explain that why. Similarly, a puppy / dog needs to know what the house rules are in an understand way (outside to pee, chew this toy).

*Example of person who thinks they are Alpha: Puppy grabs a shoe and runs off. Alpha chases and tries to take the shoe. Puppy thinks this is a big game of chase and play. Alpha grabs the puppy, body slams him on his back, stares in his eyes and says, “no-my shoe.” Alpha grabs shoe and leaves. Duh? I know if I were this puppy, I'd be confused, probably pee all over myself. If not this shoe, then what and how the hell did we get from playing a game with a shoe to throwing me around? What the heck am I suppose to chew and where are you going now? Good don't come back, you are one scary person. I don't like you very much and I think I'm going to find something else to chew because now I'm scared and anxious.”*

You can see how someone who plays Alpha, not Pack Leader with a good job description can easily mess up a puppy. An Alpha in the wild or dog pack would not

throw the pup. In fact, the pup would NEVER have the SHOE in the first place. A look would be enough. If a pup did do something out of line by pack standards, a strong Alpha would calmly go over, look and take the shoe (or bone) away. The pup would have dropped it by the look, and probably rolled over to it's side on their own.

In the human – dog pack, pack leadership and/or parenting makes more sense. It is the essential and more obvious way to teach our domestic dogs. Domestic dogs retain more juvenile aspects than wolves like barking.

If the dog doesn't know what to do, then they can't do it. If the dog isn't doing what we ask, it doesn't matter whether we stand there with our fists on our chests roaring that WE ARE ALPHA or not. The dog doesn't know what we want and/or the consequence is worth the effort of them trying. We, as the pack leader/parent have to let them know that this is meaningful, at this time, and right now. Timing is crucial. Dogs live in the present moment. 3-seconds are too late to begin teaching or becoming emotionally unglued because they chewed the DVD. Catch them in the act of doing something right, and teach them what is right.

There you have it in a nutshell. Whether a family dog owner, trainer, behaviorist or cartoonist, the better mindset is mind like water. Teach, go with the flow, organize, schedule and make changes when something isn't working with the dog. Communicate effective leadership and training skills that a dog can understand and effectively achieve and get rewarded for. Let go of the Alpha notion unless you are an ethologist or researcher, and adopt the leadership / parenting concept.

### **TOO MUCH INFORMATION (TMI)**

Our dogs respond to us in kind when they understand what we want. Family dogs are faced with multiple cues, personalities and an array of stimuli, and still manage to fit into the human pack. Their resilience, forgiveness and adaptability amazes me.

The bad news is that there are still far too many dogs euthanized every year in the USA because of a lack of understanding of basic, positive training. The largest percentage of dogs relinquished to shelters or in the streets are 3 years old and under.

The good news is we are raising awareness with education, wellness and training that is accessible to everyone on the internet, hands-on, books, e-books and TV. Sometimes it is TMI. It is our responsibility when we take a dog into our hearts and home to do what's best for our family and dog. Pack Leadership, Positive Training are the BEST POSSIBLE WAYS to enjoy a long relationship with our dogs.

Enjoy the Journey!