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Your Smart Dog

Dominance – A Four Letter Word

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The new year is when we take stock of what 2006 brought us. It's also a time of resolutions – we've got a clean slate and are ready to dive into the new year.

Personally, for me and the dogs, 2006 was, on the whole, a good year. We added a fourth dog to our family (our dear Nemo, who didn't make it as a service dog) and a temporary fifth member (Honeydew, the newest service pup in training). It took a little getting used to – five dogs is quite a pack! And two of them are under a year old!

As I sit by the fire writing this, we have six dogs in the house at the moment. Our first service dog in training, Rocky, has joined us for the holidays while his family travels to the West Coast. With this addition, there are three times as many dogs in the house as there are people! He appears to enjoy his vacations with us – he gets plenty of playtime (and naptime) with his old roommate Lily (another released service dog who has taken up permanent residence with us).

From my spot by the fire, I see four dogs on the couch and one in the easy chair. I'm in a cushy chair soaking up the heat from the fireplace, happy as a clam. Life doesn't get any better than this – a warm fire, some hot chocolate, and a roomful of dogs.

I chuckle as I look over the living room and see dogs draped on every piece of furniture, because I know there are people who would declare that allowing my dogs this freedom will cause dominance problems between me and my dogs. Dominance problems are also supposedly caused by dogs who are allowed to sleep on your bed, walk in front of you on the leash, go through the door before you, play tug-of-war, or lay in the doorway.

There is a quiet danger of having a “dominant mindset.” If you start looking for dominance, you'll think you see it everywhere.

Reality, however, tells me that there are no dominance problems in my house, nor will allowing my dogs furniture privileges contribute to such problems. How can I be so sure? Science provides the evidence. Let's take a look...

Researchers have concluded that social dominance (or hierarchy) is based on the result of a competition of some kind. For instance, if Fido routinely takes bones away from Rex, we'd conclude that Fido is dominant over Rex.



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Now think about the dogs-on-furniture example. Getting on the furniture isn't a competition between my dogs and me. It just so happens that my couch is really comfy and the dogs prefer it to the hardwood floor. My dogs don't growl at me when I ask them to move or when I scoot them over so I can sit on the sofa with them. If getting up on the furniture was their way of asserting dominance over me, I'd expect them to compete with me for the seat on the sofa. I'd expect them to growl at me to move me away from the furniture. But this doesn't happen. They gladly give up their spot when I ask.

What a shame that the dog's desire to be with us is mistakenly labeled as dominance.

What about dogs who go through a doorway first? Well, that's a sure sign of a dominant dog, according to some. But is it really?

Let's take a closer look at the dog's behavior. Is the dog growling at us when **we** walk through the doorway behind them? Are they trying to claim the doorway as their own? No, they just want to get where they're going faster than we're moving. If we could move more quickly than our dogs, they'd happily follow us through. Fact is, they can get to the door more quickly than we can and are usually excited to get through it because it means going out for a walk or getting play time.

What about those dogs who *lay in the doorway*? Certainly they're being dominant by blocking our access, right? Wrong. Most dogs like to know what their family members are up to. By lying in the doorway, they're certain to be in on the action when it happens. What a shame that the dog's desire to be with us is mistakenly mislabeled as dominance.

There is a quiet danger of having a "dominant mindset." If you start looking for dominance, you'll think you see it everywhere. Your dog comes over to get a scratch behind the ears while you're on the phone; he's trying to dominate your conversation. Your dog pulls on the leash; he's trying to control your pace and direction. Your dog jumps on you when you get home; he's trying to increase his height so he can look you in the eye. See, the more you look for it, the more you'll think it exists.

Don't dominate your dog, teach him! Make it fun for him to do what you ask.

The truth of each of those situations above is they are most likely training issues, not social dominance issues. Take the time to teach your dog walk nicely on a leash, to sit to greet you. Imagine how confused your dog would be if you asserted your dominance over him in response to his jumping on you.

Don't dominate your dog, teach him! Make it fun (and rewarding!) for your dog to do what you'd like him to do. Don't pay



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attention to him if he's mugging you for attention when you're on the phone – turn your back on him or leave the room. Be consistent (teach your family the rules and ask them to be consistent, too!), be fair, and offer good rewards when your dog behaves appropriately.

If you think your dog is being dominant, ask yourself: "Has he been taught *how to behave* in the first place?" A couple of great books that offer insight to the dominance hierarchy of dogs is Jean Donaldson's *The Culture Clash*, and Patricia McConnell's *The Other End of the Leash*. You can also contact a certified pet dog trainer in your area. (See www.ccpdt.org to find a trainer.)

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