



Pack Leadership



Five Sure Fire Ways to Improve Your Relationship with Your Dog

It's important to know that ALL dogs are descendents from the wolves, even little dogs. Understanding pack leadership helps you relate better with your dog and her actions. Once a dog moves into your house he becomes part of your family pack. If, by your family's actions, the dog thinks he is at the top of the pack, or pack leader, he might not respect and listen to you as much as you would like. This is quite common because people are not pack animals and don't always know how to effectively communicate with their dog so their dog truly understands his position in the pack and how their human really wants them to act.

Listed below are 5 sure fire ways to elevate your "pack status" with your dog, by communicating with him in a "language" he understands. Following these five steps should improve your relationship with your dog. Your dog's behavior improves because you will be more clear and concise on what you want and by lowering your dog's "pack rank" it will allow him to trust you more and look to you as a leader, instead of making poor decisions on his own.

#1 - Food:

How food is handled is very important to a dog. Food is a dog's life source and very valuable to him. Basically, in the wolf pack, the hunter is a leader. So why not let your dog know that you are the "hunter" of all food. For example, if you free feed your dog, (that is leave a bowl full of food out for him all day) your dog is more likely than not to think he controls all the food. That puts him in a leadership position. Instead, feed him twice per day. Have him watch you prepare his food, then, ask him to sit before he gets his food. Now you are in control of the food and your dog looks up to you as leader. It's also helpful if you eat your meal before you feed your dog. Leaders in the wolf pack eat first. This is another subtle example of showing your dog, in a way he understands, that you are a leader.

If your dog growls when you or anyone else approaches his bowl, he is showing signs of food possession, which can be very dangerous. Instead of putting his bowl on the ground, hand feed him. First, ask your dog to sit, then, give him a handful of food. Let him eat it out of your hand. After you have done this a few times, place 3 or more bowls with his food in them down on the floor. As he finishes the food in one bowl, throw a yummy treat in it. Typically food aggression comes from a lack of resources. But if your dog sees several bowls of food and each time you approach he gets more food he will view you approaching him as a good thing, instead of a possible food stealer. He will also see lots of bowls of food instead of one, which should help him feel less possessive. (See Working with Mild Possession Aggression Handout for more information on this subject).

#2 - Attention:

A pack leader elicits attention first. So if you are sitting on your couch and your dog comes up to nuzzle you and you pet him you are indirectly letting him know that he was a leader at that moment. Instead, if your dog nuzzles you don't pet him. Ask him to sit. By doing this you make your dog earn your praise. Each time you touch, talk to, or even look at your dog you are giving him attention. Make sure you are not inadvertently giving your dog attention for a behavior you really don't want. For example, if your dog is shaking, our first impulse as a human is to cuddle him and touch him and tell him he is ok in a very endearing voice. What the dog understands at that moment is he is shaking and you are giving him very loving attention so you must like it when he shakes and acts scared. This can cause him to overreact and offer that behavior more than he should. The best thing to do if your dog is scared is to be a calm leader. If you are in your home tell him in a calm confident voice that he is ok and go about your business. If you are outside on a walk, stay calm, let him know he is ok, and walk away from whatever is scaring him.

#3 - Territory:

If your dog is able to run through your entire house and/or yard or deck then he thinks he is in control of the territory. Now of course this isn't a problem unless he is destroying things in your house or digging, chewing, barking, or escaping out of your yard. If any of these things are happening it's best to control your environment better. For example, have your dog stay inside during the day in a small, semi-dog proof room. A crate works great if he won't be in there more than 4 hours. If you are gone all day a dog walker, neighbor or friend can come to your house and let the dog out of his crate and give him a walk. If that solution is not an option try setting up a small area in your yard as a dog run. The dog run area should be shaded, have fresh water and be cleaned daily. It's best if the dog cannot see outside his enclosed area. That way he will be less stimulated by things he can see and reduce his chances of barking. Remember, a tired dog is a happier, more relaxed dog. EXERCISE is the most important management tool. The more exercise the better! The average dog needs at least, a one hour walk per day, minimum. Increase your dog's exercise especially if you are having challenges.

Another great way for you to manage the territory is when you are home, have your dog drag a leash. You must only attach the leash to a flat collar (not a choke chain, Halti, Gentle Leader or Prong collar). Your dog can only drag a leash when you are home. By having your dog drag a leash, you can quickly step on the leash or grab the leash if your dog is misbehaving. It's a great tool to stop dogs from jumping on furniture or people. It also stops them from running off with a valued shoe or sock. If you are outside you can also have your dog drag a leash. To accommodate greater distances your dog can be attached to a long line. A long line is a 15 foot to 50 foot leash that you would use the same as a standard leash.

For even more control inside a tie down can be used. A tie down is a 24 inch to 36 inch leash, cable or chain attached to an immovable object in your home and your dogs flat collar. It can also be attach to an eyebolt in the wall. A tie down should ONLY be used when you are home. A tie down allows your dog to interact with you but not have full movement throughout the house. A tie down helps your dog learn to calm itself. It also keeps him stay out of trouble. See my Tie Down handout for more specific details.

Lastly, a pack leader always goes to a new territory first. So remember to make sure you walk through all doorways before your dog. To dogs anything on the other side of the doorway is a new territory. Teach your dog to "wait" at all doorways. See our Basic Training handout for this lesson.

#4 - Sleeping Arrangements

We've all heard, don't let your dog sleep on the bed or couch. But most of us don't really know why. The answer is the highest, most comfortable sleeping position goes to the leader of the pack. So make sure your dog sleeps or sits in a lower position than you. Now some of us love our dogs to cuddle with us. So if you must have your dog on your bed, or couch, then make sure he is allowed up by your invitation ONLY. He also must immediately jump down on your command. If he growls when you try to move him this is a serious warning to you that he is a bit "too big for his britches". He must not be allowed on any couch, chair or bed and you need to get a bit of training to help you in this arena. It would probably be best for him to be crate trained. See my Crate Training Handout for more information.

#5 - Playtime and Toys

Make sure you are in control of all your dog's toys. Have your dog sit whenever you give him a toy. It's always nice to have him sit before you tell him to go play. Once again you are giving your dog a nice, friendly, clear message that you are the leader. When playtime is over make sure to put your dog's toys away. Tug of war is ok, as long as you win! Don't let your dog play "keep-away" with a toy or ball. If your dog runs off with a toy or ball and wants you to chase him don't. Instead use a long line as mentioned above or walk away. Remember not to reinforce behaviors you don't want. See my Mild Possession Aggression Handout to teach your dog how to drop an item.