

**Del Ray Animal Hospital**  
**524 E. Mount Ida Ave.**  
**Alexandria, VA 22301**  
**(703) 739-0000**  
**www.delrayanimalhospital.com**

## **AGGRESSION TOWARD FAMILY MEMBERS DOMINANCE OR STATUS RELATED AGGRESSION**

### ***What does "dominance hierarchy" mean?***

The concept of dominance hierarchy is used when describing social relationships within groups of animals. Animals that live in groups, do so because of the advantages. There can be cooperative raising of the young, ease of obtaining food and defense against predators. Since group members offer benefits to each other, it is counter productive to fight among members and risk injury. Therefore, communication and an understanding of how to share resources is essential. Resources are usually allocated to the strongest members first. Those at the top get things such as food, resting places, mates and favored possessions preferentially over lower ranking individuals. This is "dominance" hierarchy. The rank of an individual is determined by such factors as genetics, who was first on the territory, age, results of competitive encounters, and the competition for resources.

In an encounter where one animal acts "dominant" there needs to be another who acts subordinate or fighting will occur. Subordinate or submissive behaviors include looking away, or lowered head, body, tail and ears. Extreme submission is shown by crouching down and rolling over and exposing the abdomen. Note that a dominance or pack hierarchy will develop in a group of dogs, but that dominance or leadership refers to the relative relationship of two individuals. Whether a dog is subordinate to one dog or person, has little bearing on whether that dog is subordinate to another person or dog.

### ***How does this apply to dogs in human households?***

Dogs have evolved from wolves, who live in groups, so they are evolutionarily prepared to live in a group. In most cases they are ready to accept a "leader". You may have little control over which dog in your home becomes leader. Most dogs work things out between themselves. However, each owner in the family must be a leader in his or her relationship with the dog. If no leader is present, or the dog is allowed to become leader, he will assume it is okay for him to have "first choice" to all the "critical resources", those things that dogs think are important. Such resources include food, resting places, favored possessions, mates, and territory. If the dog perceives itself as the "leader" or "alpha" (the top individual), it may respond with aggressive displays, threats and actions when challenged for control of its access to critical resources. With the responsibility of being leader these dogs may also be more possessive, protective, and anxious than dogs that have the "comfort" of knowing that another (owner or other dog) is in charge and control of their pack or household.

### ***How can I prevent my dog from becoming "dominant"?***

Dogs are naturally prepared to have a "leader". Therefore, it is important that owners set themselves up as leaders very early in their relationship with their dog. Becoming the leader does not imply harshness or punishment, but control of resources and behavior. This is accomplished with training and supervision. The individual temperament and genetic predisposition of the puppy will determine the methods needed by the owner to become the leader.

### ***How can I determine if my dog is becoming "dominant" aggressive?***

The beginning signs of dominance aggression are usually subtle. Dogs mostly use facial expressions and body postures to signal intent. A low body and wagging tail show friendly approach; a high wagging tail, eye contact and perhaps teeth showing could be an assertive approach. Dominance challenges between owner and pet usually begin with prolonged eye contact and maybe growling and/or snarling (lifting of the lip exposing teeth usually without noise) over resources such as food, resting places, moving the dog and perhaps body handling. If the owner sometimes acquiesces but continues the "challenge", the dog may escalate the aggression to snapping, lunging and biting. It will be necessary to determine the context of the aggression such as certain types of petting or handling, approaching when the dog is resting or sleeping, touching the food or toys, discipline or scolding the dog, ability to handle the body, or stepping over the dog. These aggressive displays do not occur in every situation, only those where the dog feels that its authority is being challenged.

Aggressions in these contexts are not the only criteria for determining if a dog is behaving in a dominantly aggressive manner. The body posture of the dog during the encounter is very important. Dominant dogs will usually have eye contact, may be *"stiff"*, or tense and standing tall with their tail usually up. Fearful dogs can show aggression in the same contexts as dominantly aggressive dogs, but their body posture will be more consistent with fear and would include lowered head and body, tail tucked and perhaps averted eyes. It is also possible to have multiple motivations. Many dogs are dominant as well as anxious and fearful. Not all dominantly motivated aggressive dogs behave the same and a description of what the dog looks like, how they responded to challenges and where they occur and with whom are important pieces of information to obtain before making a diagnosis. Additionally, a dog may only show aggression in limited contexts, say food guarding only, and in such case is probably not motivated by dominance but food guarding behavior. Within a family a dog may exhibit dominant aggressive behavior to some family members and be subordinate and non-aggressive to others.

### ***What should I do if I believe that my dog is acting in a "dominant" manner and/or exhibiting dominance motivated aggression?***

All aggressive challenges should be taken seriously. Dogs are capable of hurting and inflicting a great deal of damage with their bites. Physically confronting a dog who is acting in an aggressive manner can result in the escalation of the aggression and subsequent injury to humans. Dogs who have been controlling their environment and human housemates for some time will not easily relinquish the "leader" role. Physical challenges could also lead to fearful and defensive aggression.

Therefore it is important to be able to accurately determine how the dog will behave. All aggressive and potentially aggressive situations should be identified and avoided. The situations and responses are not always predictable. At no time should family members attempt to "out muscle" the dog and force it to obey. This can result in serious human injury.

Treatment starts with the owner trying to get control of situations and the dog. This does not mean harsh physical control. **First**, identify all situations that might lead to aggression and prevent access to these circumstances (by caging or confinement) or otherwise control the dog when a confrontational situation might arise. A head collar and lead is a good way to control the dog inside the home.

**Second**, identify and correct those situations where the dog may not be aggressive but is asserting its dominance. Dogs should not be allowed onto furniture or beds. These are places where people are, and therefore a potential location for an encounter and injury. Height can also confer dominance status. Dogs should sleep on their own mat, or in their own area. In addition, dogs that lead or pull the owners through doors or on walks, must be taught to heel and follow.

**Third**, withdraw all privileges. Affection, attention, praise, food, treats, play and toys are rewards and must be earned. When rewards are given on demand, the dog is controlling the owner, and the owner is rewarding the domineering or demanding behavior. In order to retrain these dogs and show that the owner is in control the dog needs to learn that these resources will only be given when they are earned for obedient and subordinate actions in the presence of the owners. Rewards also take on their highest degree of motivation when they have been withheld. Just as it would be inappropriate to try and train a dog with a piece of food immediately following a meal, it is of little value to try and use affection or play as a reward for a dog that receives play on demand. Therefore if a dog seeks any form of attention, affection, play, or food, the dog must be ignored so that it cannot achieve control over these resources.

Reward based obedience training is essential for all dogs, but especially those that are disobedient or dominant aggressive. Begin in safe and successful environments with rewards given for compliance. Once successful, these commands should be practiced in a variety of environments and with all family members.

**Fourth**, be in "control". Do this by controlling the resources that the dog wants and then require the dog to "earn" them. Usually this means that before the dog gets what it wants, the dog is asked to come, sit, stay or "go to its mat." For example, the dog can be taught that in order to receive food, petting, play, or walks it must first respond to one of these commands. Because the dog wants something it is more likely to comply. Some dogs will not sit when asked. If they do not obey, they do not get what they want. Should the dog come to you to demand attention, affection, play, or food, ignore it. The rewards must be only given when your dog responds to one of your commands.

#### ***What can be done if my dog refuses to obey my commands?***

It is essential that the owner avoid any confrontation or situation that might lead to injury or where the owner may not be able to safely gain control. Each time your dog fails to comply, it reinforces his or her control over you. For these dogs you can gain more immediate control if the dog is fitted with a remote leash and head halter, which can then be used to take the dog for walks and is left attached when the dog is indoors and the owner is at home (except for bedtime). Each time the dog is given a command that is not obeyed the leash and head halter can be used to get the desired response. Although the head halter and remote leash is an excellent means of ensuring success and physical control, you have not succeeded until the dog will respond to the verbal commands, without the need for leash pulls and halter management. In other words if the dog responds to the command it is rewarded, but if it does not obey, you must make it obey using the leash and halter (never punishment), and repeat the exercise until the dog responds to the verbal command alone. Another important advantage of the head halter is that it provides for safe control. By pulling forward and upward with a leash, the mouth can be closed, the dog can be looked in the eyes, and released and rewarded for subordinate or obedient responses. A remote leash and basket muzzle can also be used to ensure safety but they do provide the same degree of head and muzzle control as a long lead and head collar.

For some dogs, these steps will help decrease the aggressive behavior. However, dominance motivated aggression that is long standing, has already resulted in owner injury, and multiple challenges. In such cases, intervention on the part of a veterinary or applied animal behaviorist is strongly recommended. Although there are no drugs that specifically reduce dominance or help the owners to attain leadership, drug therapy may be useful in some cases as an aid to behavior therapy.