



BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Dealing with a Dominant Dog

**F**OR SOME PEOPLE, the phrase “top dog” isn’t just a saying. It actually describes their dogs. If you’ve got a dog who likes to boss you (or others) around, chances are you’ve got a dominance aggression problem in your household—a problem that could endanger you, your family, and others.

Most dogs assume a neutral or submissive role toward people, but some dogs will challenge their owners for dominance. A dominant dog may stare, bark, growl, snap, or even bite when you give him a command or ask him to give up a toy, treat, or resting place. Sometimes even hugging, petting, or grooming can be interpreted as gestures of dominance and, therefore, provoke a growl or snap—and this is true even though your dog may still be very affectionate and often solicit petting and attention from you.

To understand why your dog behaves in these ways, it’s important to know some things about canine social systems. Animals who live in social groups, including wolves and domestic dogs, establish a social structure called a dominance hierarchy within their group. This hierarchy serves to maintain order, reduce conflict, and promote cooperation among group members. A position within the dominance hierarchy is established by each member of the group, based on the outcomes of interactions between themselves and the other pack members. The more dominant animals can control access to valued items such as food, den sites, and mates. For domestic dogs, valued items might be food, toys, sleeping or resting places, and attention from their owners.

For your home to be a safe and happy place for pets and people, it’s best that the humans in the household assume the highest positions in the dominance hierarchy, particularly with dominant dogs.

## Is Your Dog Dominant?

You may have a dominance issue with your dog if he:

- Resists obeying well-known commands.
- Won’t move out of your way when required.
- Nudges your hand, mouths your arm, or insists on being petted or played with—in other words, he “orders” you to obey.
- Defends food, toys, or other objects from you.
- Growls or bares teeth under any circumstances.
- Resists handling by you, the veterinarian, or the groomer.
- Gets up on furniture without permission and won’t get down.
- Snaps at you.

## What to Do If You Recognize Signs of Dominance in Your Dog

If you recognize the beginning signs of dominance aggression in your dog, consult an animal-behavior specialist immediately. Avoid using any form of physical punishment on your dog. Getting physical with a dominant dog may cause the dog to intensify his aggression, posing the risk of injury to you.

If your dog has shown signs of dominance aggression, take the following precautions to ensure the safety of your family and others who may encounter your dog:

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