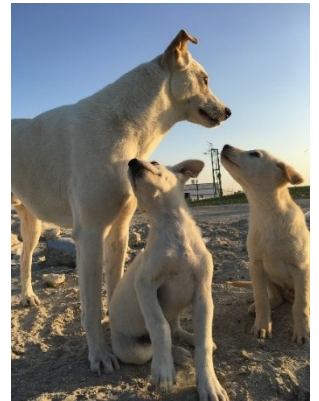


The myth of canine dominance

Introduction

The outdated belief came from research done on captive and unrelated wolves in a zoo in Switzerland in the 1940s. It was assumed that because dogs descended from wolves, we could surmise that wolf behaviour and dog behaviour were the same.

- The study revealed wolves that had to fight and use aggression constantly to get what they needed, and it noticed that one wolf usually won. The study did not look at wolves in the wild and it was the only study done for decades.
- The supposed alphas are what we would call in any other social group, 'parents'.
- Wild wolves live in family groups with two parents cooperatively raising their pups together which means there is no innate sense of rank, but a cohesive family unit.
- The offspring naturally follow their parents as you would expect in any other species. Nobody has won the role of dominance by fighting, they simply are in charge, for want of a better expression, by the simple fact that they are the parents.
- As the pups become older, they do not try and overthrow the supposed alpha (their mum and dad), they simply eventually disperse, mate, have their own pups and therefore form their own pack.



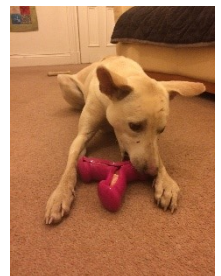
The wolves first studied were unrelated and in an enclosed environment. These wolves also had limited resources and had to fight for what they wanted. And resources, like many other animals including humans, matter very much.

Resources

A resource is something that the animal needs, wants or deems important.

Examples of resources for a dog include:

- Food
- Bed
- Toys
- Treats
- The owner
- The sofa
- A particular place in the house
- Another family member



Growling

Some dogs will guard their most prized resources aggressively by growling or attacking anybody that comes close to them or it. Other dogs may feel so relaxed or unmotivated by their resources that they allow anybody to come close to them, or use the resource, or take it away. And others will have learned from experience that if they fight for their resource, with a particular individual, they will always lose so it is best to not bother.

Case study:

The dogs in the photos below are a good example of the dominance hierarchy belief being outdated and resource guarding being a perfectly normal dog behaviour.

You'll note from the photos that they are happy to walk together on or off the lead, share beds and they are able to leave food in a bowl, uneaten, despite the other dogs being in close proximity.



However, when a **highly valued resource** is added, things change (please study the picture below):

- The black dog regards bones as a very precious resource and when the brown and white dog (her long-time friend) approaches she growls at her continuously to back off.
- The brown and white dog does retreat (full video available in this unit) as she has either learned from previous experiences that there is no point fighting for the bone as she will lose: or that the bone is not as precious a resource for her as it is for the black dog and there is no point getting into a fight over it.
- This is completely normal dog behaviour and the black dog is not the 'alpha' dog.
- The black dog is simply telling the other dog to go away as she really wants this bone for herself.
- The brown and white dog recognises this behaviour and therefore no fight happens.
- Ethologists have warned against the use of the term 'dominant' to describe individual dogs.
- Dominance is an attribute of the usual behaviour between two individuals when they interact or come into competition over a resource or situation in which one will always back down rather than fight.

