

Understanding canine social structure

It is important to know that, unlike many social groups of animals, there is no dominance or linear hierarchy for dogs (social structure with clear ranking where each animal in the group is dominant over those below it and submissive to those above it).

There is no 'alpha', or 'top dog', nobody is constantly fighting for supremacy, and nobody is trying to overthrow the leader through aggression or dominance. Instead, the following is true of their social structure when living on the streets, beaches or around human settlements:



- They live in small family groups – usually mum and pups and they will often stay together until the pups are over a year old.
- Dogs don't mate or pair up for life. The female dog is mated by a male dog who may have got every other dog in the neighbourhood pregnant.
- There is no cooperative raising of pups – like 97% of mammals, the mother raises the offspring on her own.
- Aggression is rare but females are more aggressive after birth. Fighting is risky and expensive for dogs. There is the risk of being injured and it uses up potentially unnecessary energy. Dogs are very sociable and equipped with a huge array of body language postures to avoid conflict. If a dog does get into a fight it is usually to protect itself from an actual or perceived threat, to protect its puppies or to guard a resource that is important to it.
- Relatively transient, short-lived groups of unrelated individuals around a food source (human rubbish or food provided by carers) is common and normal.
- Most dogs enjoy the company of other dogs and will engage in play behaviour if their welfare is good physically, mentally, and environmentally. Young dogs especially enjoy playing (chasing, play fighting/wrestling, tugging games) and will seek out this behaviour when they are together. Dogs will also happily play with humans they know and trust.
- Free roaming dogs do not hunt together for food but forage or scavenge independently, usually from the leftovers of human food, around bins or garbage dumps, or food that has been specifically left out for them by carers. You will not find domesticated, free roaming dogs living independently of humans. Where there are dogs, there will be humans.

