



# A dog is a dog...

... not a wolf, not a leader waiting to stage a household coup, not a pink elephant... So why do some people advocate treating him as something he's not?

So there I was, sitting at home on the sofa, jotting down a few notes for this article, when one of my dogs looked at me with her big brown eyes, pleading to join me. How could I refuse? Up she came and we enjoyed each other's company on the sofa.

After a while, I set off towards my study, to type up my notes. I left my dog snoozing on the sofa, and walked around my other dog, who was lying in the middle of

the floor, catching the last rays of sun beaming through the patio door...

And here is the issue! According to some dog trainers and behaviourists, I have just broken two pack rules, which, in their opinion, means I am letting my dogs be dominant, or I am showing subservience, and allowing them the opportunity to raise their status in my so-called pack.

Dogs need direction, guidance and boundaries, but in providing this for our dogs,

do we agree on what we mean by this terminology? It appears not. I like to think of myself as a responsible dog owner with all that goes with it. Others, however, like to call themselves a leader. But what do they mean when they use this term?

## Leader of the pack

There are two possibilities I can think of: one is being a benevolent leader, teaching a dog the boundaries by which he must live (otherwise known

as training) and providing positive guidance and direction when needed. We train our dogs to be well behaved and we train them to be clear on what they are allowed and not allowed to do in the house. If that fits an owner's definition of 'leader' and that's the label they choose to use for themselves - fine - but it is no more than doing what any sensible, responsible dog owner would do.

The other definition of leader is when an owner

believes their dog is part of their pack and the owner has to play at being 'alpha' to ensure the dog doesn't try to raise his status. This means enforcing pack rules to establish the owner's leadership, potential mistreatment of the dog, and, quite probably, inconsistent messages from the owner, all of which could result in a very confused, stressed dog. Bearing in mind the plethora of research over recent years that completely dispels the myth of domestic dogs being part of a pack with humans and trying to gain a higher status, this type of leadership has no validity at all. Just because the dog descended from the wolf doesn't mean we need to treat him as a wolf, domesticated or otherwise.

## Top dog?

The 'pack leader' scenario continues to be a bone of contention between trainers and behaviourists who have learned from this research, use up-to-date, positive training methods and have moved on - and those who have not. Regrettably, TV has not helped the modern trainer or behaviourist get these up-to-date methods across to the general public as widely as they should, as the pack leader scenario continues to be popularised by a mainstream US-based TV presenter. And, of course, if it's on TV, it must be true - right?

Well, actually, no. Regrettably, some dog owners embrace the harsh methods of being pack leader (pronged collars, electric shock collars, alpha rolls, 'flooding' etc) as something new. But they have been around for many years, and, prior to the popularisation of 'dog whispering' methods, were slowly disappearing from UK training classes, as they are regarded as old fashioned,

aversive training, often harmful to the dog.

One particular practice that we get so wrong is performing an 'alpha roll' on a dog, thinking that we will make him submissive. This is not a new practice but it has been around since at least the 1970s when the Monks of Skete published a book on dog training based on harsh, dominant methods. Sadly, the alpha roll has become popular again amongst the devotees of 'dog whisperers', but it is a misguided concept and potentially harmful to both dog and owner.

An alpha roll involves rolling the dog on to his side or back, pressing his chest to the floor with one hand, and turning the dog's head to one side with the other hand so he can't make eye contact. This is not putting the dog into a submissive position; we are, in fact, being confrontational. A dog showing submissive behaviours to another dog or human does so voluntarily; he is not forced into that position. When two dogs are fighting, one may 'pin' the other to the ground and may be intent on inflicting serious harm, but the dog being 'pinned' is not communicating submission - he's fighting.

If a dog shows a submissive posture, he will do so voluntarily to diffuse a potentially threatening situation. It's an instinctive behaviour that does not involve any physical interaction from another dog or an owner. But if a dog is manhandled into that position and restricted, he will resort to one of his, now limited, coping strategies. He may retaliate and try to bite the owner, or he may resign himself to accepting the situation, but he is not being submissive. Alpha rolls do not replicate dog behaviour, so if an owner manhandles their

dog in such a way, they are not showing their dominance over the dog and they are not getting their dog to 'submit'. If anything, owners are being confrontational. Alpha rolls are not part of canine communication, be it a dog or a wolf.

## Pack mentality

Of course, the assumption of being a pack leader assumes that there is a pack to lead and there is often some confusion over what is meant when we use the word 'pack'. There is nothing hard-wired in a dog's brain that tells him to be part of a pack. Pack behaviours develop during the critical socialisation period when the dog is still a pup. Therefore they will vary depending on the experiences the dog has as a puppy, his social interaction with people and dogs, and the environment he is brought up in.

I use the word 'pack' to describe a group of dogs. There is no hierarchy and no alpha. In a multi-dog household the hierarchy (if there is one) is fluid. One dog may be dominant over the others in a particular situation while another dog may be dominant in another situation. Researchers of feral dogs describe them as a 'group' not a pack. Dogs frequently join and leave the group; there are multiple breeding females who breed with whichever male they like, and sometimes with more than one. Females have to raise their pups on their own with no help from the male or the group, and there is no cohesion or stability within the group.

This bears no resemblance to the wolf pack model. If feral dogs do not form packs in the same way as the wolf, why would we think that



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## What's your dog thinking?.....



Dogs are not domesticated wolves. They are as far removed from their ancestors as we are from ours. Using alpha rolls, pack rules and other erroneous practices, apart from being potentially dangerous to both owner and dog, may only suppress an unwanted behaviour - it will not change it

domestic dogs do? Well, they don't. They form a social group, both with other dogs and with humans.

Neither are the so-called 'pack rules' part of canine behaviour, but we are erroneously told to inflict them on our dog to show him that the owner is the pack leader. Pack rules don't even apply to free-roaming wolves, so there is no justification to apply them to domestic dogs.

So, pack rules were based on supposed wolf behaviour, but in fact have no more meaning to a wolf than they do to a dog, and the manhandling practices we are told to perform on the dog have no meaning, or worse, the wrong meaning in canine communication.

To understand why applying pack rules on our domestic dog is wrong, we must understand at least a little about wolf behaviour so we can appreciate how different dog behaviour is. Despite some people's misconceptions, an alpha wolf does not dominate his pack or dictate what they can and cannot do, apart from during the breeding season. Instead he guides them in a benevolent manner.

### Family ties

The primary role of an alpha male and female is to produce offspring, which is why authorities on free-roaming wolves now call them the 'breeding pair'. A wolf pack is usually made up of family members; they are sociable, and all cooperate in hunting, rearing cubs and guarding their territory. The size of the pack is largely governed by the number of wolves that can closely bond so they can work together as a team. The alpha does not always eat first, despite dog owners being told to do so because that's what wolves

are supposed to do. In fact, the alpha may not even be at the kill site and one wouldn't reasonably expect wolves to sit around a 'kill', waiting for the alpha to arrive.

### Leading by example

The wolf pack scenario seems to conflict with 'dog whispering' methods that tell us we must be pack leader, act as alpha, and use pack rules based on supposed wolf pack behaviour. If that's their advice then they should at least get the wolf behaviour right. But dogs are not domesticated wolves. They are as far removed from their ancestors as we are from ours. Using alpha rolls, pack rules and other erroneous practices, apart from being potentially dangerous to both owner and dog, may only suppress an unwanted behaviour - it will not change it. There is no blanket cure-all for unwanted behaviour. Every behavioural 'problem' needs to be considered on its own merits so a specific behaviour modification programme can be applied to that specific dog.

So was I right in inviting up and then leaving one of my dogs on the sofa? Was I right in walking around my other dog that happened to be in my path? Absolutely! My dogs don't care if I or any of my family eat before they do. They don't care if I go through a doorway first, initiate and finish games, or walk around them or any of the other so-called rules. Dogs have a large capacity to learn, so my dogs have been trained to move if I need them to and to get off the sofa if told to do so. I consider my dogs as being part of my social group, not part of any pack, but, most importantly, they have been trained to be well behaved and to know their boundaries. And isn't that what we all want from our dogs? ■