

Article by Kirk Brice, DVM



**E**very day, I am confronted with pet behavioral complaints. The answer to the issue is usually simple to me but difficult to correct. The problem is that most owners are not the leaders of their pack.

Dogs are pack animals, and there is a pecking order between all living beings in the household. Does your dog tell you when you are going out for a walk and for how long? Does your pet tell you when, what and where he or she is going to eat, sit and sleep, or waste yet, where you are going to sit or sleep? Sadly, these animals are calling the shots, because they are the alpha of the pack.

Sometimes the dominance is non-contradictory and benign. For instance, the dog who won't eat his food so the owner keeps switching hands trying to be the "first" one. The owner leaves the food out all day hoping I'll be out. What the pet parent doesn't realize is that I'll be in overweight and needs to be eating less. An incident is convinced she is going to starve so is now cooking for her. However, the veterinarian that is causing diarrhea "Woe, where to start. There are lots of problems, a few common causes, and diarrhea is the least of them. I can easily make the diarrhea with some medicine and a special diet. The real issue is solving the owner problem. When owners tell me that the diarrhea is not getting better they usually confess that they aren't feeding the special diet because I'll be in to eat it. That is when I tell them that they (the owners) are still variable, because their dog has trained them well. We all laugh and then agree, but the truth is sad.

So I tell my story that we are all animals and are all trained the same way. It is either because we don't see the consequences of disobedience or we want the reward for compliance. Does the dog get a consequence for refusing to eat? No, it gets a reward by getting a new food. The dog has total control of the food dish, giving him more dominance because the food is left out 24 hours a day.

I treat my animals just like I treated my kids. I would make dinner and tell my kids if they didn't like it they didn't have to eat it. However, if they didn't eat it there would be no other food consumption until the next

scheduled meal. Same with my pets. The food is put down for 15 minutes. If they don't eat, the food is picked up, and they don't eat until the next meal. Both my kids and my pets have always been great eaters. You can establish being alpha of the pack without confrontation, but you must take control.

In my 40 years as a practicing veterinarian, I have never seen a dog starve himself. The most scenario is that the breaking point is a hunger strike to a dog after the owner's breaking point. When trying to get owners of an obese animal to feed a diet best, they often nervously ask, "What if they don't eat the food?" Then the problem resolved, because they will eat when the dog hungry enough and they will lose weight quicker than you.

A lot worse scenario is when the dog decides to exert his dominance in an aggressive way, including. You do something the dog disagrees with and he/she disagrees you by growling or biting. You do what the dog says, and then he or she rewards you with affection. Again, who has trained whom?

One of my favorite stories is about a six-year-old female with an ear infection. I went to look at the ears, and the dog tried to bite me. The owner claimed to and said she couldn't do anything to the dog or he would bite her. The dog was alpha, but the problem was the dog could not hear or hear himself. So I put on a muzzle on the dog, not me, and proceeded to work the ear. By the time the dog submitted, I was dripping sweat and the dog was exhausted and panting. I was then able to quickly clean and medicate the ears. The owner returned and I had to keep the dog because, again, she could not do anything without getting better. Her face was covered and by day three, the dog was cooperative. I never punished the dog again, and I never had to wrestle the dog again. I had established I was alpha and we could do it the hard way or the easy way, but no matter what I was going to do what needed to be done. However, for the rest of that dog's life I had to keep him because he was sick, because the owner could never change.

I would love to go on with more stories, but I have run out of space. Remember it is important to be the alpha of your pack to be the leader. Without the alpha and order, there will be anarchy, which can lead to a miserable life for both you and your pet. ❁

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### **Who's the Leader of Your Pack?**

Author: Kirk Dixon, DVM

Every day, I am confronted with pet behavioral complaints. The answer to the issue is usually simple to see but difficult to correct. The problem is that most owners are not the leaders of their pack.

Dogs are pack animals, and there is a pecking order between all living beings in the household. Does your dog tell you when you are going out for a walk and for how long? Does your pet tell you when, what and where he or she is going to eat, sit and sleep, or worse yet, where you are going to sit or sleep? Sadly, these animals are calling the shots, because they are the alpha of the pack.

Sometimes the dominance is non-confrontational and benign. For instance, the dog who won't eat his food so the owner keeps switching brands trying to find "the one." The owner leaves the food out all day, hoping Fluffy will eat.

What the pet parent doesn't realize is that Fluffy is overweight and needs to be eating less, but instead, is convinced she is going to starve so is now cooking for her. However, the homemade diet is causing diarrhea. Wow, where to start.

There are lots of problems in this common scenario, and diarrhea is the least of them. I can easily solve the diarrhea with some medicine and a special diet. The real issue is solving the owner problem. When owners tell me that the diarrhea is not getting better, they usually confess that they aren't feeding the special diet, because Fluffy won't eat it. That is when I tell them that they (the owners) are still trainable, because their dog has trained them well. We all laugh and they agree, but the truth is sad.

So, I tell my story that we are all animals and are all trained the same way. It is either because we don't want the consequence of disobedience or we want the reward for compliance. Does the dog get a consequence for refusing to eat? No, it gets a reward by getting a new food. The dog has total control of the food dish, giving him more dominance because the food is left out 24 hours a day.

I treat my animals just like I treated my kids. I would make dinner and tell my kids if they didn't like it, they didn't have to eat it. However, if they didn't eat it, there would be no other food consumption until the next scheduled meal. Same with my pets. The food is put down for 15 minutes. If they don't eat, the food is picked up, and they don't eat until the next meal. Both my kids and my pets have always been great eaters. You can establish being alpha of the pack without confrontation, but you must take control.

In my 34 years as a practicing veterinarian, I have never seen a dog starve himself. The usual scenario is that the breaking point in a hunger strike is a day after the owner's breaking point. When trying to get owners of an obese animal to feed a diet food, they often sincerely ask, "What if they don't eat the food?" Then the problem is solved, because they will eat when they get hungry enough and they will lose weight quicker: win-win.

A far worse scenario is when the dog decides to exert his dominance in an aggressive way via biting. You do something the dog disapproves of and he/she disciplines you by growling or biting. You do what the dog says, and then he or she rewards you with affection. Again, who has trained whom?

One of my favorite stories is about a six-pound toy poodle with an ear infection. I went to look at the ears, and the dog tried to bite me. The owner chimed in and said she couldn't do anything to the dog or he would bite her. The dog was alpha, but the problem was the dog could not treat or heal himself. So, I put on a muzzle (on the dog, not me) and proceeded to wrestle this tiny dog. By the time the dog submitted, I was dripping sweat and the dog was exhausted and panting. I was then able to quickly clean and medicate the ears. The owner informed me I had to keep the dog because, again, she could not do anything without getting bitten. Day two was easier, and by day three, the dog was cooperative. I never muzzled the dog again, and I never had to wrestle the dog again. I had established I was alpha and we could do it the hard way or the easy way, but no matter what, I was going to do what needed to be done. However, for the rest of that dog's life, I had to keep him anytime he was sick, because the owner could never change.

I would love to go on with more stories, but I have run out of space. Remember it is important to be the alpha of your pack to be the leader. Without discipline and order, there will be anarchy, which can lead to a miserable life for both you and your pet!