

PUPPIES GONE WRONG: THE ROLE THE DOMINANCE THEORY PLAYED IN THEIR DEMISE

Julie K. Shaw, RVT
Senior Animal Behavior Technologist
Purdue University, Animal Behavior Clinic
West Lafayette, IN

COMMON PROBLEMS

Puppies are commonly seen at the Purdue Animal Behavior Clinic with the following problems:

Fear and Anxiety Issues

Some puppies are generally fearful of their environments while others may have specific fears to people, objects or other dogs. Puppies may become fearful for various reasons:

Genetics. Genetic fear may be seen in puppies only a few weeks of age. Puppies do not learn from bad experiences until after 8 weeks of age, therefore, puppies under 8 weeks of age should recover from a frightening experience without making an association to the frightening stimulus. Puppies that are less than 8 weeks of age and demonstrate fearful behaviors are likely to be genetically fearful. Some puppies also have a genetic predisposition to becoming fearful during their first fear period (8-10 weeks of age) or during their second fear period which occurs between 6-18 months of age. Genetic fear issues usually have a poor prognosis.

Lack of Socialization. A puppy's socialization period (4-14 weeks of age) is a critical time of its development. If a puppy is not socialized it, may become fearful of stimuli that it did not encounter during this time.

Traumatic Experience During a Fear Period. An 8-10 week old puppy is not only in its socialization period but may also experience the first fear period which makes a puppy in this age range very sensitive to developing life-long fear issues. Punishment and aversive or physical abuse during this period can ruin a puppy for life. A second fear period occurs near puberty and a puppy can also be permanently damaged psychologically by a fear-provoking experience during that time.

Learning. Puppies begin to learn from aversive situations after 8 weeks of age. Often fears are very specific and can be attributed to specific events. Because these fears may be quite specific they can be more easily treated.

Conditioned Unwanted Behaviors

Hyperexcitability. Hyperexcitability may be a breed characteristic and normal in some puppies. Hyperexcitability is often conditioned by the owners when they give the puppy attention during excitable periods. Owners who constantly interact with their puppy often cause the puppy to continually seek attention. The puppies are virtually never "off duty." Hyperexcitability can be greatly reduced by ignoring inappropriate behavior, interacting in a consistent manner (command-

response-reward) and by teaching appropriate behaviors (response substitution). Hyperexcitability can also be dramatically reduced by walking the puppy off of its property twice daily for mental stimulation.

Inappropriate Play. Owners and family members often inadvertently reward inappropriate play with attention or even punishment. Punishment is usually not administered appropriately and puppies often find even aversive attention rewarding.

Aggression – see below.

Aggression Toward Family Members

Owners often become very frustrated and angry when inappropriate play and hyperexcitability continue. They may increase their punishment of the play behavior to the point the puppy becomes confused and frightened which puts the puppy into a motivational conflict (the puppy wants to play with the owner but is frightened at the same time). This scenario can easily lead to an aggressive situation.

THE CAUSE

The Role of Learning in Puppy Behavior Problems

Puppies are constantly learning and often learn how to avoid frightening situations through avoidance conditioning. If a behavior can prevent a negative stimulus (or what the subjects think may be a negative stimulus) from occurring, the behavior will increase in frequency. Behaviors conditioned by avoidance conditioning are very resistant to extinction. Virtually all aggression by puppies under 16 weeks of age is fear based (NOT dominance related) and conditioned through avoidance conditioning.

The Role of Poor Communication in Puppy Behavior Problems

Conditioned Unwanted Behaviors. Owners often condition unwanted behavior because they do not understand basic learning theory. For example, they may push a puppy down when it jumps up. The owners believe they are reprimanding the puppy while in reality the puppy finds the interaction rewarding. Owners often tell their puppy "no" instead of telling the puppy what to do. Owners also interact inconsistently with their puppy by talking to them and generally treating them like human children which in turn inadvertently rewards many of the behaviors the owners find inappropriate.

Inappropriate Use of Punishment. +P = adding something to decrease a behavior. Positive punishment includes physical punishment, "shaker cans," and squirt bottles. This type of punishment is rarely needed with a puppy, and almost always causes behavior problems to become worse. Also, it is rarely administered properly (i.e.: timing is correct, punishment occurs every time the behavior occurs, the punishment is not associated with the owner but is associated with the behavior and the punishment is the proper intensity).

-P = removing something the puppy wants to decrease the behavior. An example of negative punishment would be the withdrawal of the owner's attention from a misbehaving puppy. The use of negative

punishment is much less likely to inflame existing behavior problems or inappropriately reward unwanted behaviors.

“The Dominance Theory” – A Communication Disaster. The dominance theory was originally based on studies done on wolf packs in the 1940’s. It was extrapolated that dogs had social hierarchies comparable to wolves. The adapted theory went as far as to assume that a human family replaces a dog pack. It was theorized that a dog tries to gain the top position over family members and may become aggressive to lower ranking “members of the pack.”

There were three significant flaws in the early research:

- 1) The initial wolf studies were short-term and only focused on about 1% of a wolf’s life, namely hunting (A. Murie, 1944).
- 2) Sweeping conclusions were then made from this information and then generalized to dogs and to the human-dog relationship.
- 3) The researchers observed what are now known to be ritualistic displays and misinterpreted them into forcible dominance displays. For example, researchers determined that a higher-ranking wolf forcibly pins a “subordinate” wolf to the ground. We now know that the “subordinate” wolf is not forced to the ground but voluntarily assumes the position as part of ritualized appeasement behavior.

Veterinarian Ian Dunbar made the comparison that trying to understand dogs better by looking at wolf behavior is comparable to humans attempting to improve their parenting skills by observing primates.

This dominance theory has been over used and complicates the relationship we have with dogs. In the past, puppies were considered “dominant” when they demanded petting, pushed through doorways, jumped up to greet people or guarded objects. It is now understood that when a puppy “demands petting” or paws at the owner, it is simply performing a conditioned behavior. The puppy is rewarded for pawing when the owner gives the puppy attention. Pushing through a doorway is simply an indication that sitting at the door has not been taught – it is an issue of lack of training. Jumping on people is a greeting behavior and is conditioned by people responding to the behavior with touch and attention. Guarding of a resource is almost always initially fear or anxiety related but becomes conditioned through avoidance conditioning. The puppy then becomes more confident after experiencing the success of getting out of the stressful situation and eventually no longer shows anxiousness. Guarding of a resource can be an early indication that a puppy is at risk of developing conflict related aggression.

THE NEW RELATIONSHIP

It was previously believed that dogs that demonstrated dominance aggression (aggression directed toward household members in situation where the social position of the dominant dog is challenged) was most commonly seen in intact males between the age of 2-3 years. It was thought that dogs demonstrating “dominance aggression” were confident, pushy dogs that showed confident body language.

Research from the Ontario Veterinary College and the Atlantic Veterinary College, 1999 showed that aggression toward family members is **not** typically a problem of intact male dogs. Although male dogs were over represented, neutering had no influence and females of small breeds were more likely to bite.

The research also indicated that aggression to family members is typically a puppy problem, many times less than 1 year of age and was seen as early as 3-4 months of age.

Dogs often demonstrated conflicting body language rather than confident body language. Dogs often trembled and slinked away after an attack. Owners report that the dog seems remorseful and they often describe the dog’s personality as “Jekyll and Hyde” like. It is common for these dogs to show conflict and anxiety behaviors during a behavior consultation.

Other factors included that dogs that were aggressive to family members were likely to have had a serious illness in the first 4 months of life (Serpell and Jagoe, 1995), did not get walked off the property often and showed a high level of excitement, reactivity and fearfulness. Dogs often performed ritualized conflict behaviors in the owner’s presence.

An Alternate Explanation...

Whenever the dog is uncertain or uncomfortable in a situation (i.e. conflict situation), he has learned to use aggression to avoid the situation (i.e. avoidance conditioning). The dog becomes less fearful because he learns how to avoid the fear provoking situation.

Common situations in which a dog may become aggressive include being picked up or restrained, when confronted, stared at or punished, when reaching over the dog’s head or when asked to move off a couch or other space. They may also become aggressive over food items or other objects.

Owner characteristics often include a strong anthropomorphic involvement (special meals, frequent treats, dog sleeps in bedroom. Owners prefer a loving and dependent dog and would feel desperate if dog died). They are usually first time owners who lack knowledge of training and/or have used punishment based training methods. The owner’s interactions with the dog are frequently inconsistent and unpredictable.

Initial Expression of Aggression

Early indications for conflict related aggression may include inappropriate play, food or object guarding, fear and conflict behaviors.

High Risk Puppies May:

- Be fearful and anxious
- Have had a serious illness under 4 months of age
- Be hyperexcitable
- Not get walked often (lack of mental stimulation)
- Lack training or harsh training techniques have been used
- Be owned by owners who are anthropomorphic which can increase inconsistency and predictability causing fear and anxiety

Puppies at high risk or that are demonstrating early signs of conflict related aggression should be diagnosed and treated by a veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist as early as possible.

PREVENTION OF CONFLICT-RELATED AGGRESSION

Puppy temperament tests have been shown to be of little value. Prevention should focus around making the puppy's environment more consistent and predictable. This can be done by teaching the owner to interact with the puppy in a command-response-reward fashion. Puppies should be trained behaviors such as "sit" and "down" so the command-response-reward can be utilized. It is recommended that bite inhibition and "leave it" cue be taught. The puppy should be desensitized to handling, restraint and interactions around the food bowl. Owners should be encouraged to not use punishment and to attend a good puppy socialization class.

Punishment is Inappropriate in the Treatment of Aggression

IN CONCLUSION

The "Dominance Theory" often damages the human-animal bond because owners believe their puppy views them as a lower ranking "pack member." Owners often feel they need to practice techniques such as "scruff shaking," "alpha roll overs" and other domination techniques to control their puppy. These techniques increase anxiety and fear for both the owner and the puppy and are counter-productive in the treatment process. Owners are often relieved and compliant to the treatment plan when they understand that the puppy is not trying to "dominate" them but is anxious and uncertain.

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