

“Pack Leader” Myths
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The “pack leader” idea has been misinterpreted and over-used. Objective data relevant to this concept have been obtained by two animal behaviorists in New York City, Drs. Peter Borchelt and Linda Goodloe. They distributed a survey to over 2,000 dog owners which asked detailed questions about the behavior of their dogs, including what kinds of social interactions owners permitted and the frequency of occurrence of various forms of aggressive behavior. It is commonly believed that playing tug-of-war games with dogs and allowing them to sleep on their owners’ beds will cause them to challenge and be aggressive toward their owners. The survey results did not support these beliefs. Instead, there was no correlation between whether or not tug-of-war and other competitive interactions were encouraged and the likelihood of dominance aggression. Allowing a dog to sleep on the bed was not correlated with the occurrence of dominance aggression. These results support the idea that there is nothing inherently wrong with allowing dogs to sleep on the bed and playing tug-of-war with them.

Another common belief is that feeding the dog before the family eats leads to the dog achieving a dominant position because he is allowed to eat first. Not only is there no evidence to support this belief, but careful analysis reveals the faultiness of this logic. The major way that animals express dominance is by competing over scarce resources such as food. Since owners typically are not competing with their dogs to get to the dog’s food first, a competitive interaction does not occur. The important point is not when the dog eats but rather, from the dog’s perspective, whether the person and dog are contesting for the same food.

Dogs can be aggressive over food, toys, a favorite resting place or when people try to move them. When a dog shows threatening behavior such as growling, lunging or snapping or outright aggression in these circumstances, dominance may be one of the potential causes. Fear or defensive behavior is also a common motivation for aggressive behavior. Any time a dog shows threats or aggression professional help should be sought immediately. Next time we’ll discuss more rational ways to establish and maintain dominance over your dog.