

THE PET CONNECTION

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WHO IS THE PACK LEADER IN YOUR HOUSE?

Whether you own one dog or several there is a group dynamics occurring in your home that you may not be aware of called The Pack Hierarchy. In the wild a pack of dogs/wolves is a very organized social unit. That unit includes a pack leader called an Alpha male. There is also an Alpha female. Only the Alpha male can breed the females in the pack, and he usually only breeds with the Alpha female. He makes the decisions about where the pack will live, where it will hunt, and enforces pack discipline. All the other animals in the pack are submissive to the Alpha male and female. This insures the well being and survival of the pack.

Let's bring the group dynamics of the Alpha pack leader into your suburban home. It is instinctual for a dog to expect there to be a pack leader to follow. In the absence of a strong pack leader one of two scenarios will occur. The dog or dogs in your home will try to fill the roll of pack leader, or they will live in a state of insecurity. Neither of these scenarios is ideal for your dog, and for reasons that will become clear later, often leads to many negative behaviors. The best scenario, and the one that will produce a happy balanced pet, is for the human in the home to take on the role of pack leader.

This may sound simple, and you may even believe that you are already the pack leader, after all, you feed your dog, you walk your dog, you decide when to turn off the lights at night but does this mean that you are the pack leader? A pack leader makes a decision and enforces it regardless of the input received by the other members of the pack. So, when it comes to feeding, are there rules in your house that your dog needs to obey? Is there a set time controlled by you that your dog is fed? Who decides when it's time for a treat, you or your dog? Who decides when it's time for a walk, when it's time to go to bed? Do you ask your dog if he/she wants to go out, or do you just make a decision without their input. Same with bed time, does your dog head for the bedroom first or do you? Who gets the best part of the bed, you or your dog? I bet you are starting to get my drift

Some behaviors that are a dead give away that you are not the pack leader in your home include:

- Barking at everyone who comes to your house or at noises (your dog is not confident that you can protect him/her or the rest of the pack)
- One of your dogs bullying the other dogs in your home (this dog is trying to fill the position of pack leader because he perceives the absence of one)
- A dog that pulls you down the road or strains on his/her leash when walking (this dog does not trust you to lead because the you have not asserted yourself in this role, instead you have become submissive to your dog's behavior)
- Begging at the table or growling over his/her food bowl.
- Canine chaos in your home, especially in homes with multiple dogs. This includes running through the house, jumping on furniture, and destroying household items (there is an absence of discipline because there is no pack leader)
- If your dog is nervous or scared of everything (dogs get their confidence from the calm, assertive presence of a good pack leader)

So, after reading this list who do you think is the pack leader in your home? If it's not one of the humans than you have some work to do! And just so you don't misunderstand, being the pack leader doesn't mean that you can't love your dog(s), it's just means that you love your dog(s) after leading and disciplining him/her/them. They will get it, they want that kind of relationship, they are waiting for you to step up and be a good pack leader!

How you will know if your are being a good pack leader:

- Your dog(s) will be calm and relaxed (because they can trust that the pack leader is on the job making good decisions for the pack)
- Your dog(s) will look to you for direction instead of trying to lead themselves.
- Your dog(s) won't fight with other dogs or with each other. (they can trust that the pack leader is going to protect and keep the pack safe)
- There will be order to feeding time, during walks, when you leave the home and when you come back. (dogs desperately want there to be order and discipline in their pack, that's how the pack survives)

If you need to become the pack leader in your home but you are not sure how to do this there are many resources on the topic. Look online, find a book on dog behavior at the library, or catch some of the dog training shows on cable TV such as The Dog Whisperer, Me or the Dog, or Dogs 101 to name a few. It will take some effort, but your reward will be a dog or pack that is well adjusted, happy, and a pleasure to live with!