

# HOW TO HELP YOUR DOG REGARD YOU AS LEADER

by Terry Ryan

In recent years much has been written about dominance and the relationship between people and dogs. Terms such as "alpha syndrome," "social hierarchy" and "pack leader" have become buzz words. Several years ago, I coined my own buzz word when I began to tell my obedience class students that they had to *alphabetize* themselves.

Although I believe the theory of dominance and subordination is sometimes over-emphasized, I also believe that it's important to lay a foundation of mutual respect and understanding between people and their dogs.

If your dog is rather pushy and out of control, lacks respect for your point of view and doesn't mind letting you know about it, he or she could be showing signs of the dreaded *alpha syndrome*, which means that your dog doesn't regard you as leader.

The alpha syndrome is at the root of many behavior problems in dogs. By making a few subtle adjustments, you can improve how your dog views the social hierarchy in your family.

The *alphabetizing* plan involves changing daily interactions with your dog. It does not involve punishment.

This is not a program for the serious offender. If your dog has growled or snapped or is resentful, please seek professional help.

Following are some of the *alphabetizing* concepts. Implement as many as you can. Stay with it for several weeks. As your dog becomes rehabilitated, you may gradually phase the program out.

**1. To be leader, you must first get your follower's attention.** -- Encourage eye contact several times a day: Call your dog's name, help the dog make eye contact with you by tracing a line with your hand between your dog's face and

yours. You can make your hand more interesting by holding a toy or other inducement. Even a one-second glance should be reinforced with praise or a reward.

**2. A Leader is dependable.** -- Food is a primary reinforcer. Use it to your best advantage. Scheduling meals (as opposed to providing a continuous food supply from the floor) puts your dog in a position of dependence on you for food.

**3. The leader eats first.** -- If any of your meals happen to coincide with any of the dog's scheduled meals, make it a point to feed the dog *after* you have eaten.

**4. Praise and treats must be earned.** -- During this rehabilitation period, offer petting and treats *only* when they are "earned" by obeying a command. If your dog comes to you for attention, tell the dog to "sit" before petting. If your dog isn't already trained to sit, it's time to start teaching a few basic commands. Talk to a dog obedience instructor.

**5. The leader enters first.** -- Don't allow your dog to charge in and out of "territory" before you. At the door of your home, vehicle, or at a gate, have your dog wait for you to go through first, then invite the dog in or out.

**6. The leader controls territory.** -- A follower yields to the leader. For instance: If your dog is lying down in a hallway and you wish to pass, *make your dog move*, don't step over or around. Simply bother the dog with your foot as you tell your dog to get out of the way.

**7. Leaders mean what they say.** -- When giving your dog a command, don't beg or scream. Speak in normal tones. Give the command only once and help your dog comply.

**8. Leaders are winners.** -- Control and win games. Play fetch when you want to, not when your dog pesters you with the ball. Ordinarily tug-of-war games are inappropriate for a pushy dog. They may escalate assertiveness and when you let go, your dog considers it a "win." An important message can be conveyed, however, if you play by these rules: Keep the game brief so your dog won't become overly excited. In playing fetch or tug-of-war, be sure to *win* (have your dog release the toy to you), and while your dog is watching, put the toy out of the dog's reach.

**9. Life with your dog is not a democracy.** -- It's a partnership, but with you making the important decisions. Many conflicts occur over resting places. Your dog may sleep in your bedroom at night, but until the behavior problems resolve, not on your bed.

Here are a few concluding tips on establishing leadership:

- Whenever you pet your dog, put your hand over the top of the muzzle and gently hold it there for a few seconds.
- Help your dog roll over for a daily belly-rub.
- Have regular grooming sessions. With positive reinforcement, gradually include "sensitive" spots, if any.
- If your dog knows the "down" command, have him hold one 30-minute down-stay per day.

Your training philosophy should focus on rewarding good behaviors, not punishing inappropriate ones. Give your dog about 20 minutes of obedience training a day. Break it up into two or three sessions. Be fair, kind and consistent. Be firm, but not harsh. The concept of an alpha owner will become clear to your dog with consistent repetition.