Re-Arranging Metaphors for Dogs

By Zazie Todd, PhD. Happy cats. Happy dogs. Thanks to science.

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The problems with the wolf pack metaphor go deeper than you think.

One of the metaphors many dog trainers despair of is that of the wolf pack. According to this, you are supposed to be ‘leader of the pack’ to your dog, who is trying all the time to be ‘dominant’. The way you stop this is to be ‘dominant’ yourself which involves awful things like ‘alpha rolls’. It’s surprisingly pervasive.

It is not really based on science but on a kind of folk science, of how wolf packs are believed to be, which does not bear much relation to reality.

The obvious problem with this is that being violent to your dog is not humane. Numerous studies show a correlation with the use of aversive training techniques and behaviour problems in dogs (e.g. Deldalle and Gaunet 2014; Herron, Shofer and Reisner 2009; Blackwell et al 2008). There are better ways to train than pinning your dog to the floor or hitting him on the nose.

Another problem is insidious in the way it affects people’s relationship with their dog. According to some of the people who use this metaphor, you are not supposed to let your dog on the bed or settee, or even get ahead of you on a walk, because then your dog would be ‘dominant’. What if you want your dog to sleep on the bed or cuddle on the settee with you? Isn’t it up to you?

The problem goes deeper still because metaphor is not just a figure of speech. It actually shapes our thoughts. Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson say, “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”

Eva Feder Kittay writes of metaphor as “re-arranging the furniture of the mind.” If we change the metaphor, we change how people think.
So how might the pack metaphor affect our thinking? Not only are we equating dogs to wolves, but also ourselves as "leader of the pack". This is an example of the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS.

Being the pack leader seems to be a personal quality, a way of being that is akin to charisma. The pack leader is not a modern, transformational leader who leads by inspiration, but an old-fashioned one who relies on punishment when subordinates step out of line. Or even stares, growls at or pins a puppy preemptively.

This is especially serious because you must never terrify a puppy; puppies need lots of positive socialization experiences. The pack metaphor implies that sudden actions to assert dominance will make our dogs behave, when in reality training takes time and effort and food. The idea of a pack leader implies dogs must obey when we should give them choices in life (see The Right to Walk Away). And it seems to blame the victim if someone is having trouble with their dog; "they just aren't assertive enough."

We feel love and affection for our dogs, but this is missing from the pack metaphor. And so is fun, because in pack-world you must either never play tug or never let your dog win.

In contrast the family metaphor, by which we are dog moms and dads, puts love at the centre of our relationship with dogs. It implies we will take the time to teach our dogs how to behave. It implies our relationship is one of nurturing them and that even if we have problems, we will solve them – because we're family.

Some readers will say this is not a metaphor for them but literal, even if they are not implying personhood for their dogs. It’s time to ditch the language of packs. We need to re-arrange the furniture and consign the pack metaphor to gather dust in the attic. We can pick a different metaphor instead, and talk about the fact it takes a plan and practice and tasty treats to train a dog well. Because dogs are family, and our furry family members need love, training and walkies, not dominance.

How do you like to think of your relationship with your dog?

My Amazon Picks

Further Reading
Bradshaw, J. (2011) Why dog trainers will have to change their ways, The Guardian 17th July 2011

You might also like:
How to choose a dog trainer
Do Dogs Prefer Petting or Praise?
The ultimate dog training tip

References
Deldalle, S., & Gaunet, F. (2014). Effects of 2 training methods on stress-related behaviors of the dog (Canis familiaris) and on the
8 comments:

Natasha 22 July 2015 at 10:19

My relationship with my dogs is definitely more "human familiar" than "wolf pack," but I definitely also grew up with some of these metaphors and haven't figured out how to shake them.

Luckily for me, the internet helps me learn about a variety of things, and it's helped my training dramatically, and makes it easy to move away from "leader of the pack" mentality. I still call the dogs' pack to my husband, but I don't really think of it in terms of "leaders" so much as "family." The herding dog wants the pack/family all in the same room, for example.

Thanks!

Reply

aBetterDog 22 July 2015 at 23:25

Great article, thanks for posting. I find that a lot of heated conversations are sparked (especially in social media) through difference of opinion on the definitions of words.

Reply

Chasing Dog Tales 23 July 2015 at 13:09

Wonderful article! They are a lot of different ways to describe the relationship but unfortunately the "pack" term has been associated with dominance rather than being part of a "family" or "team" working together in a positive fashion.

Reply

Sakoschek 24 July 2015 at 09:35

To me, dogs are very vulnerable. They depend entirely on their humans. You cannot explain things to a dog. I want to avoid any trauma, give her as much freedom as reasonably possible. This freedom she gets is only possible thanks to training. For us it means, recall, basic house manners, and a few tricks to keep busy. No more. I must confess I not very good at playing. Don't play with humans, don't play with my dog, or little.

The only place I met dogs on their own, was in Tahiti, were you can see groups of dogs feeding from the garbage, live and run where the environment is not hostile. One day, in the hills, I saw 2 dogs in front of me, a narrow path. I got scared, and my instinct made me go on the side, sit down and look in front of me. Had no knowledge of dogs at that time.

Why would anyone want to dominate a dog, when teaching him/her is, not only more humane, but also the better solution on the long run?

The answer is, I'm afraid, lack of love and lack of compassion.

Reply

JaneB 25 July 2015 at 00:47

I do not have a problem with term. I am quite comfortable with thinking of myself as 'pack leader' for my two dogs and like others, think of it as simply being 'head of our family' or 'head of our group'. Benevolent leader. I do not believe that the term itself affects my opinion on the definitions of words.

Reply

Camille @ GoodPetParent.com 25 July 2015 at 13:35

All the things you mentioned - never letting your dog go through a doorway ahead of you, never letting him win a game of tug, not letting him up on the couch since the couch/bed is exclusively "your territory" - was exactly what I was taught years ago, both in Vet Tech school and by all the instructors of the dog training classes I took with my dog. (Not to mention the use of choke collars for training, ugh.)

The trouble with using dominance theory vernacular like it is simply another figure of speech is that it continues to reinforce those outdated (and scientifically disproven) beliefs. The use of the terms "pack leader" and "dominance/submission" has detrimental effects because it only serves to perpetuate concepts that are, at best, scientifically inaccurate, and at worst, just plain wrong and unfair to our dogs.

It seems like it takes forever for old, outdated ideas to die off and newer, more accurate ones to propagate through popular culture. I know we will get there eventually, but the old "pack and dominance" theories can go away any time now! Thank you for a great article.

Reply

Sunny Day 3 August 2015 at 15:57

I've always thought of us as a team. We all have to cooperate to achieve the end goal. Even if the goal is 's it,' I have to have the patience and motivator, and the dog has to have the motivation and action.

However, I'd like to know if anyone out there has experienced the benevolent-leader-as-alpha situation. For example, at one point I had 2 DSH litter-mates (one black & one calico), and a beagle. That calico was in charge of all of us! The dog deferred to her, but
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