

# Who's the Boss?

## Reforming Your Dominant Dog

*Tracy Bitz*

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*Writer's comment:* "The key to a good feature article," Eric, my journalism instructor, was explaining—I think, I was devoting most of my attention to the slightly deformed but cuddly little beasts for adoption on PugPros.org—"is finding that one thing you are completely passionate about." He paused to notice my diverted gaze. "Like Tracy, for example. She loves little dogs whose faces look like they've been smashed into walls." And so it was decided: my opus for English 104C would include the misadventures of my own Jimmy Pugsworth. Jimmy's escalating obnoxiousness also provided the impetus to conduct some research, so I thought I'd kill the proverbial two birds. Sadly, I've been a bit lax with my own advice and Jimmy isn't exactly set to pull in an obedience title any time soon. Special thanks to Eric Schroeder: Thank you for preaching that our voices and opinions are more important than pretentious academic conventions. Your wit, individual attention, and meticulous feedback made being your student an absolute pleasure and an unmatched learning experience.

—Tracy Bitz

*Instructor's comment:* I'd like to set the record straight about one thing. In her introduction above, Tracy makes it sound as if she was constantly screwing around in my class, daydreaming and looking at websites devoted to deformed dogs. Not true. (Well, certainly not entirely true.) As she herself acknowledges, she did hear some things I said and actually took them to heart. My primary lesson in the journalism course is to write about what you know and care about. Tracy's feature is a great example of this maxim. From the opening anecdote it's obvious her own experience is great material for this article. But what really makes the piece superb is the layering of the personal experience with the research she incorporates on retraining a dominant dog. The two threads are so seamlessly intertwined that we experience pure pleasure reading the piece, and it's not until we've finished it that we sit back and realize just how much we've learned from it.

—Eric James Schroeder, English Department

**I**T WAS A LOVELY, UNUSUALLY SUNNY DAY at the beach in Half Moon Bay when I fully realized I lived at the whim of a funny looking eighteen-pound ball of fur. I had been so excited to show my human companions how hard my little Jimmy had worked at obedience class. His bug eyes, a deep brown, looked into mine with the perfect devious mix of devotion and disinterest. He knew I was about to unclip his leash and let him free. He remained in a sit for about two or three full seconds before bolting, first in a large circle, then in several smaller ones after his tail.

It was less than a minute before he spotted the Swedish tourists about fifty feet down the beach, their infant daughter toddling around, haphazardly holding a large cookie in her left hand. Jimmy took her down with one gentle push of his paw, delicately grabbing the cookie with a look of pure glee and making large circles around the tourists and my shocked companions, his tongue and curly pig tail hanging straight out in either direction.

We eventually regained control of the savage beast, but not before the Swedish woman had to offer me another cookie to try and lure him in, and certainly not before scarring a small child for life. As I walked down the beach with my arms wrapped tightly around Jimmy's tiny, wet body trying my best to overcome the urge to strangle him, I couldn't help interpreting his smug look as remorseless self satisfaction. The realization hit me hard: I have no control over this beast. He is the boss.

Meet Skipper. A seven-or-so year old Cairn Terrier, he drives his owners, Terry and Dan, up the wall with his incessant barking, aggression with other dogs, and uncontrollable behavior off his leash. "I worry about him taking off," admits Terry: "he thinks he knows everything." Take Max, a two-year-old Boston Terrier/Bulldog mix who tries to single-handedly take on Rottweilers at the off leash dog park. His owner scoops him up and scolds him while he pants and blissfully ignores her, unaware his doggy opponent could have probably swallowed him in one bite.

Plenty of pet owners have slowly come to the realization that their Rover or Fido has a serious behavior problem – and many of these dogs are much larger and more intimidating than Jimmy, Skipper, and Max, who weight-in collectively at around sixty five pounds. These dogs are alphas – they are at the will of no one but themselves. Does your usually friendly dog bite you if you politely ask him to move over on the couch? Does he find the most embarrassing item in your trash and then guard it with fangs and snarls? Does she demand treats or dinner with

barking, jumping, and growling? You just might be the not-so-proud owner of an alpha dog.

Often times, alpha dogs seem to be otherwise great pets. In an article about alpha behavior, dog behavior specialist Vicky DeGruy elaborates: “They’re confident, smarter than average, and affectionate. They can be wonderful with children and good with strangers. Everything seems to be great with the relationship—until someone crosses him or makes him do something he doesn’t want to do. Then, suddenly, this wonderful dog growls or tries to bite someone and no one understands why.”

Most alpha dog owners are reluctant to admit that their dog’s dominance is a problem or that they are confused about how and if they can treat this issue in their pet. Many are excellent, usually otherwise responsible pet owners who have gone a step too far in spoiling their pooch. Some argue that certain breeds are predisposed to aggression or the desire to be in charge. While it is true that aggression can be a trait found more commonly in certain breeds, like Chow Chows or Pit Bulls, both of which are bred to be guard dogs, a dog of any breed can become an alpha. Despite a laundry list of excuses, treating your dog’s dominant behavior should be a priority. An alpha dog is, without exception, a potentially dangerous dog, a potential exemplified by Jimmy’s behavior at the beach. In addition, dominant dogs can be a danger to themselves, chasing cars or bicycles or ignoring their owner’s cries as they saunter into a busy street.

According to attorney Kenneth Phillips, who specializes in victims of dog bites, over five million people in the United States are bitten by dogs each year, fifteen to twenty of these dog bites being fatal. High profile legal cases, such as the brutal San Francisco mauling of Diane Whipple by her neighbor’s two huge Preso Canarios, demonstrate the potential danger of aggressive dogs. Being the owner of such animals also carries serious consequences—the owners of these two deadly dogs faced a myriad of criminal charges, and a conviction of second degree murder. Even if your alpha dog never hurts a person or another dog, there are still good reasons to treat their dominant behavior, foremost being the sanity of those who have to live with your overzealous pet.

The incident at the beach was the final straw for Jimmy the pug, so I began to do some research on what I was calling his “little problem.” It was hard for me to accept that his bad behavior was my fault; I had tried so hard to be the perfect pet parent. But as I read page after page of training manuals, dog behavior books, and informational web pages,

I couldn't ignore how perfectly Jimmy matched the description of the alpha dog who has taken over control of his home. "You," I warned him, "think you are the alpha dog. But things are going to be changing around here, buddy." I could have sworn he shrugged before biting my shoelace with a loud growl.

In order to understand the mindset of my demented pug, or any alpha, it is important to understand the mechanics of dog behavior. Dogs are pack animals descended from wolves (even pugs, despite their closer resemblance to sausages, pigs, or even insects) and as such follow a strict hierarchy of dominance. That is, all dogs establish a pecking order in their "pack," or in this case, their family. At the top, the alpha rules the roost—what he or she commands goes. The alpha gets first pick at food, sleeping space, and in general gets to boss around the other members of his pack. Animals in a pack will compete for the top spot, and once the alpha has been established, this becomes the norm. Submissive dogs, for example, may look pitiful with their ears back and a low, shallow tail wag, but these dogs are content and secure knowing their place in the pack. As animal trainer Carol Lea Benjamin puts it: "He's not genetically programmed to grow bitter and spend his life on could-have-beens."

One of the reasons for the dominance hierarchy in dogs is that it actually avoids conflict. If every member of the pack recognizes that the alpha chooses first, there is no need for a fight every time the animals eat, drink, sleep, or play. According to UC Davis Animal Science Professor Dr. Anita Oberbauer, dogs are also equipped with a broad range of nonverbal cues that allow the pecking order to be conveyed. This also means you could be allowing your dog to dominate you – and not necessarily be aware that you are doing so. Whenever you convey submissive behavior to your alpha dog, such as relenting when he demands to sit on the couch or eat a piece of your snack, it reinforces that behavior.

Suddenly, Jimmy's attitude of entitlement makes sense. He's the alpha; why should he listen to us when we insist he go outside to do his business on a rainy day? Why not stand on the coffee table when we are trying to read the *New York Times* in peace? Armed with a new knowledge of animal behavior, I am no longer content to be a lowly serf. "Your going down, Alpha," I tell the pug. He's much too busy to acknowledge me; the cat has just settled down on his pillow and he's off to furiously chase her through the house.

Behavior modification for dogs who have issues with dominance can seem overwhelming or even unnecessarily harsh for pet owners, especially for those who have always been permissive parents. Often this is the reason the dogs assumed the position of alpha in the first place. However, two things become quickly apparent: First, asking the alpha nicely to step down and surrender his crown to its rightful human owner will not be particularly effective. Second, retraining your dog to take his proper place below humans in the pack is not unreasonably difficult or cruel. The trade off for an owner's effort in retraining is having a more agreeable, safer pet. Imagine a life free of alpha-tude, where your pup is happy to oblige when you call him and doesn't harass you over dinner.

While animal experts disagree on an exact program for decreasing dominant behaviors, particularly in how lenient you can continue to be while trying to reform your dog, there are many easy to follow tips to help de-alpha your dominant dog. What follows are a few simple steps any pet owner can do to reestablish their dominance with their pet.

1. **Take an Obedience Class.** Okay, so it wasn't a cure-all for Jimmy, who earned his blue ribbon in basic obedience. Yes, Dorothy Parker said "That dog is practically a Phi Beta Kappa. She can sit up and beg, and she can give her paw – I didn't say she will but she can." But obedience is an excellent first step in showing your dog who's boss and working on reinforcing important commands like come, sit, and stay. Remember that obedience training is as much training for the pet owner as it is the pet. According to DeGruy, "It teaches you how to be alpha, how to enforce commands and rules, how to get respect and to keep it."
2. **Get to know B.F. Skinner.** Remember all that operant conditioning stuff? Here's a quick refresher: After years of extensive laboratory research to test how much cats disliked being put in a box and how easy it was to get a dog to drool on command, behavioral psychologists learned that animal behavior is controlled by its consequences: reinforcement or punishment. Nothing beats positive reinforcement for cruelty free dog training that yields real results. Use treats and praise liberally.
3. **Be Consistent.** According to Pamela Dennison, author of *The Idiot's Guide to Positive Dog Training*, "inconsistency is extremely

frustrating for dogs, just as it is for humans.” Stop confusing your dog by allowing his behavior sometimes but not others. Just one table scrap lets your dog know that you will eventually cave if he persists in begging; researchers have found random reinforcement to be one of the most powerful motivators of behavior.

4. **Abolish “No.”** Your alpha dog has heard this word so many times he doesn’t know what it means. It’s also a vague command; once he’s learned some basic obedience replace it with “sit” or “come” and watch how much more effective it is at stopping bad behavior in action.
5. **Evaluate and Restructure Your Relationship.** The time has come for Jimmy to realize that he is, well, a dog. That means sleeping in a crate and not under my covers. It means he needs to sit before getting dinner, going outside, and getting affection. It means taking on the role of the alpha in body language and brain power. Trainer Dolores Blake reminds pet owners that “training your dog is about relationship building. If your dog is not convinced that his world is a wonderful place because of his relationship with you, he will not look to you for direction and leadership.”

Living with a dog who does not dominate you and your family means a happier, safer, and more peaceful coexistence. Some dogs may need professional help. If your dog has already bitten someone, continues to be dangerously aggressive, or does not respond to any of the above techniques, it’s time to consult your veterinarian or a local animal behavior specialist. As for Jimmy, he’s definitely shown improvement, especially with responding to commands and decreasing his attention-seeking behavior. He seems happy to have his own place to sleep, even if there is never a mint on his pillow. As for his alpha-tude, I’ve discovered that it’s been mostly pug-itude all along. But we’ve come to an understanding that leaves both of us content—he’s welcome to sit on the couch, he just needs to be invited first.