The Evolution of Dogs

Pet dogs have been bred for generations to enhance specific behaviors and increase domestic tranquility.

However, when domestic dogs are abandoned they often return to the living arrangements that wild dogs keep. This doesn’t mean that your dog is a junior wolf spin-off, but ancestral behavior influences your dog. A few generations of domestication are a drop in the bucket compared to thousands of years of adaptation to scavenging around human settlements.

Dogs have a shorter flight distance than wolves and don’t need a large family to bring down elusive prey. They eat garbage. Their ancestral behavior includes begging, foraging, and being willing to approach new sources of food, like humans. They also reproduce more often and with more puppies per litter than wolves so if humans stole some of the pups, it all evened out.

In a stable pack, there are a few qualified members to whom the others defer in difficult situations, such as when food is scarce or when shelter is shared. When times are lean, the group’s more qualified members are the only ones to reproduce. No one knows how the dogs make this agreement to limit puppies in lean times, but the dogs accomplish it, nonetheless.

You have probably heard “Leader dogs” described as Alpha dogs or Dominant dogs. However, calling the leader alpha, for “first” can lead to the assumption that the leadership relationship is one sided. It’s more complicated than that. Dog families are webs, not hierarchies. Social status, or “who’s in charge,” changes with the situation at hand, and there may be more than one leader. Contrary to legend, leaders are not usually aggressive.
Socially qualified pack members request deference from pack members in the form of appeasement behavior. Subordinate dogs crouch and look away when they catch the eye of a status holder. They may even roll over and expose their abdomens. This appeasement behavior serves to keep peace in the group. If a subordinate member challenges leadership by staring back or refusing to defer, a leader would reprimand the subordinate with a growl or snap of his jaws. Serious confrontation in a stable group is uncommon.

When confrontations do occur, they are usually noisier than they are harmful. For example, if one member of the group has a bone, a stronger individual may not even want to take it away. However, if one dog approaches a bone recently abandoned by another dog, it may only take a glance from the owner for the would-be thief to pass by the temptation. It all depends on the relationship between the two individuals and does not even involve their leader.

So how does this help you and your dog? When a dog joins a human family the relationships are the same, more closely resembling a web than an organizational chart. From the dog’s point of view, it isn’t always clear who is making the decisions—especially if most of the family is away from home during the day. Your dog may get conflicting messages when you share food with him or brush and pet him. If he is unsure of the roles, he may resent having his ears, feet, or mouth touched by you. He will not give up food or preferential resting places at your request and he will not always respond to your requests.

Leadership is earned, and based on your control of resources in the household. Thankfully, you can use a dog’s natural inclination to respect leadership and the control of resources to better manage your dog’s behavior.