

Dominance Theory

As a dog behavior consultant and trainer, I am called to address many different types of behavior issues. This past month I responded to a disproportionate number of calls pertaining to aggression in adolescent dogs. The common factor in all these cases was that the owner attempted an outdated technique known as the Alpha Rollover or Alpha Roll. For those unfamiliar with this term; alpha roll refers to a technique where the dog is forcibly flipped onto his back and held, generally by the throat, until he “submits”.

The concept of the Alpha Roll originated from a theory that as humans we could relate to our canine companions better if we used the same techniques as their wild relatives, the wolf. The “back to nature” feel of this theory made it highly contagious and soon it was appearing as a valid training technique in popular literature. It developed from the theory that dogs are like wolves and therefore live in a hierarchical social structure that requires an alpha dog. In the absence of such a leader, another dog will take up the position. This misinformation originated from researchers who observed the interactions of wolves in an artificial atmosphere where there are additional stresses on the animals that they would not have experienced in their natural environment. Captive animals behave much differently than their wild companions.

The Alpha Roll assumes that domesticated dogs behave in the same fashion as their wild cousins. Consider all of the genetic manipulations that we have made to create different breeds; such as the fine tuning of certain innate behavioral characteristics to create better hunting, herding or guard dogs. More recently, we have further tampered with genetic byways to create very tiny toy breeds as accessories to our lifestyles and even dogs with hypoallergenic fur. The processes of domestication and breed enhancements will alter not only the physical characteristics of the dog but the behavioral ones as well.

Although the dominance theory has been debunked among behaviorist, it has unfortunately retained a stronghold with the general public and with trainers who still teach primarily aversive training philosophies and methodologies.

The Alpha Roll should never be done on a fearful dog, as it will only increase the fear. In truth, the only time that a dog will physically pin another is when he intends to kill him. In most of the interactions that people witness, it is the submissive dog that rolls over to appease the more aggressive one. Almost all of the cases of dog aggression that I see are actually based in fear. That is, the dog is telling the owner that he is afraid of a situation, object, another dog or person. Usually, the dog will tell the owner that they are afraid with subtle body changes. He is asking, in doggie terms, for the owner to change the situation. To another dog, this body language is loud and clear but most owners are ignorant to what is being said. When a fearful

dog is further stressed he will escalate his expression of fear by growling and perhaps lifting the lips to show teeth. If this is ignored as well, the dog may feel forced to strike in order to create the distance he needs to feel secure.

The Alpha Roll is most commonly attempted when the owner feels threatened or that they are losing control of the situation and therefore must display their “dominance” to the pup. Reacting out of anger and frustration, the owner ends up escalating the aggression to the point that they become afraid of being bitten so they release the dog who is still in an agitated state. Inadvertently, the owner has taught the dog, that to relieve a highly stressful situation, he must become aggressive.

Being the boss is not acquired by force or intimidation rather by setting firm guidelines and by thoughtful and clear communication. A common language between owner and dog can be established through obedience training. Teaching what is expected from the dog will set him up for success and will establish the owner’s role as a benevolent leader of the family pack.