

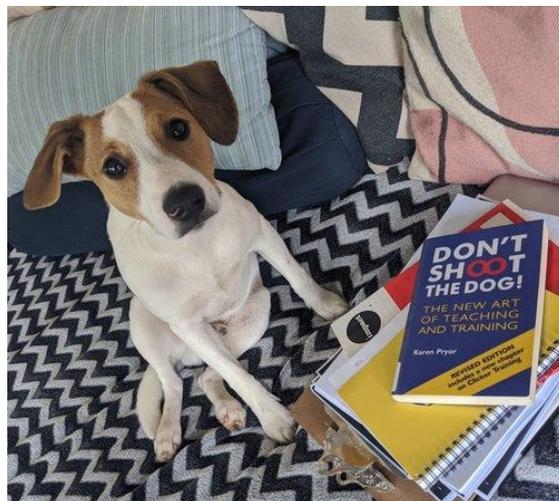


APDTNZ Position Statement

Dominance Theory

In line with modern training techniques, which are based on scientific and widely accepted studies regarding the use and misuse of 'dominance theory' (also referred to as 'wolf-pack theory,' or 'alpha theory'), the APDTNZ advises against the acknowledgment and application of dominance theory when training dogs.

Within the highly unregulated field of dog training, the concept of dominance is frequently encountered with varying degrees of understanding. The dominance theory is based on the concept that in order to have a compliance from a dog, one must establish a hierarchy where humans claim the role of "alpha" or "pack leader." Many people, including some animal industry professionals, believe that submission is a key component to successful training.



According to dominance theory, behaviour "problems" and non-compliance are explained as the dog "trying to gain rank." The dominance theory suggests that the way to address training failures is to "regain alpha rank," which often leads to the use of punitive and aversive training techniques that can damage the relationship between the dog and their caregiver.

Defining Dominance

Within intraspecies (1) social interactions, dominance is described as a relationship, not a state of being or personality trait. The modern scientific consensus is that dogs are not inherently dominant or submissive. Dominance may be exhibited between two or more dogs within a confrontational situation or conflict which may occur, for example, in a competition over resources. However, dominance is often dependent on context and is not static. For instance, one individual might be dominant over another in some situations or at certain times but not in others.



Additionally, dominance is almost never aggressive and is often a mitigation of conflict using subtle body gestures.

There is no scientific evidence to suggest that dominance may exist within interspecific (2) relationships, such as those between dogs and humans. Furthermore, there is no scientific evidence to support this approach in dog training. More so, it certainly does not justify the use of punitive or aversive techniques or tools in training. There is nothing to suggest that the use of dominance or submission is needed for a dog to learn. Dogs learn from consequences, not rank. We know from the literature that dogs can learn from other dogs, from other species (like humans), and by interacting with their environment.

What to Do

Training should encourage a healthy and trusting relationship that minimises stressors and promotes positive welfare. Successful training outcomes, behaviour management and behaviour modification can be achieved while using the kindest and most ethical, humane practices –



positive reinforcement, all while developing a strong human-dog bond. To achieve this, we can reinforce behaviours we want to see repeated in place of undesired ones, and we can establish an environment that will set the dog up for successful outcomes. All training protocols, including those used for animals assessed with “dominance aggression,” should focus on the

function of the behaviour, its antecedents (3), and its consequences. Modification should be based on how that function can be altered by teaching an alternative behaviour, adjusting the dog’s emotional response through classical or operant counterconditioning (4) and systematic desensitisation⁵ or environmental management.



The APDTNZ Code of Ethics requires members who train dogs to focus on teaching clients the skills they need to avoid reinforcing undesired behaviours and to demonstrate how to be a consistent and compassionate caregiver. Misunderstandings of the outdated dominance theory and the aversive techniques used to justify its use has no place in modern, evidence-based training.

Footnotes

(1) Intraspecies refers to relationships between individuals of the same species (example, dog-dog).

(2) Interspecific refers to relationships between individuals of two different species (example, dog-human).

(3) An antecedent is something that precedes the behaviour; the trigger or context that causes a behaviour to occur.

(4) Counterconditioning is the process by which we change the association of a negative emotional response to a stimulus to a positive response. There are two processes by which counterconditioning can be applied.

- Classical counterconditioning would be accomplished by pairing the sight, sounds and approach of a trigger with one of the dog's favourite rewards to change the emotional state to one that is calm and positive. When referring to "counterconditioning," this is the usually the intended definition.
- Operant counterconditioning would be accomplished by teaching an alternative appropriate behaviour (also known as Differential Reinforcement of an Incompatible Behaviour (DRI)).

(5) Systematic Desensitisation is an evidence-based approach to modifying behaviour that combines relaxation techniques with gradual exposure to help the dog slowly overcome pre-existing fears or phobias.