

## Reverse Dominance Program

Wild canids organize themselves into social hierarchies. Within the group, a dominant alpha individual holds the position of leader, several subordinates fill in the ranks at various levels below the alpha leader and finally there is the lowest ranking individual, the omega. Omega is the lowest rank in the wild canid social hierarchy and, while it is an important role in maintaining pack stability, it is a thought to be a position of many hardships.

Due to their descent from wild canids; dogs thrive in a hierarchical system and do enter into pack-like relationships with their families. While the well-adjusted dog should consider himself of a lower status than all human family members, occasionally a dog acts in such a subordinate or shy manner as to hinder both his and his owners' enjoyment.

Reasons for excessive submission are many and include negative or lack of experiences at an early age, breed predisposition and exposure to harsh training practices. Sometimes, the reason for a dog's excessive submissiveness is never elucidated. Another indication for a reverse dominance program is the excessively shy dog, who often has had similar experiences as the submissive dog. The primary goal of the reverse dominance program is to increase the confidence of the submissive dog through the reward of confident behavior and independent thinking, disregarding submissive or shy behavior and changing the dog's perception of his owners.

- **Acknowledgement** - Do not acknowledge any submissive or shy behavior from your dog as any attention, even negative attention, will serve to reinforce such behavior. For example, do not comfort your dog if he cowers from you or a new situation. Instead, wait to reward confident or relaxed behavior such as direct eye contact, and confident approaches. Also, resist the temptation to scratch your dog's belly if he rolls over on his back. Other submissive behaviors to ignore include flattened ears, tail between the legs, a head hung low, submissive smiles with lips retracted and submissive urination.
- **Body language** - Dogs are able to identify the emotions and status of other dogs through the interpretation of body signals. Similarly, dogs watch their owners for visual cues. Certain body postures that seem benign to us are considered threatening by dogs and can trigger submissive behavior in a shy dog. In trying to build your dog's confidence, it is important to communicate the benevolence of your leadership. Avoid direct eye contact, standing over your dog and petting on the top of your dog's head and neck. Such behaviors can be interpreted as challenges from you and assertions of dominance. Instead, avert your gaze to the side when interacting with a submissive dog and stroke the side of the dog's neck or scratch his chest. Sitting down so you are at eye level with your dog and positioning yourself so that the side of your body is facing him are also ways to communicate that you are not a threat.
- **Punishment** - Absolutely no physical punishment should ever be used on a submissive dog as this will only increase the dog's anxiety and trigger the dog to perform more submissive behaviors. This includes hitting, scruffing the neck, and alpha rolling. Yelling also will hinder your dog's progress on the reverse dominance program.

If your dog is doing something wrong, firmly yet calmly say no, remove your dog from the situation, if necessary, and then praise your dog for stopping the undesired activity. Then take steps to prevent your dog from performing the undesired behavior in the future or train your dog to perform a more desirable behavior.

- **Benign training** - As with any behavior modification program, training is an integral part of the reverse dominance program. But choosing an appropriate method of training is vital to the success of the program. Coercive methods, such as the use of choke collars, prong collars or force, will only serve increase your dog's anxiety and submissiveness. Rather, use positive reinforcement with immediate reward for desired behavior.  
Clicker training is an ideal training method to use with a submissive dog since it increases confidence by giving the dog the power of choice. In clicker training, the desired behavior is marked with a click which is then followed by treats and praise. The dog performs the behaviors out of desire for the reward rather than avoidance of an aversive stimulus. The dog soon learns to explore new behaviors in attempts to get his owner to click and reward him. Clicker training can also be used to reward confident behavior such as direct eye contact and approaching novel situations.
- **High places** - Allow your dog on high places or spend more time down on the floor interacting with him. When a dog is at eye level with a person, the dog's authority is increased, which will elevate the dog's confidence. Encourage your dog to spend time on furniture or the bed although initially you may need to entice the dog with treats or affection. Smaller dogs should be allowed to sit in people's laps. If having a dog on the furniture is unacceptable to you, the purchase an elevated dog bed that can then be placed next to the sofa or bed will achieve similar results.
- **Games** - Games can be a great way to build confidence in your dog. For example, playing tug-of-war and letting the dog win on most occasions will build bravado in a dog the same way it does in a person on a winning streak. Playing fetch, hide and seek, and chasing games (where the dog chases a person or a toy on a rope) are also good confidence builders. It is important to remember not to push your dog past the point of fun, rather let your dog decide when to quit. When your dog gains enough confidence to initiate play, try to acknowledge such a confident gesture by playing with him for at least a few minutes.
- **Freedom** - Freedom, for a dog, is a privilege that can be related to social status. Allow your dog the run of as much of the house as possible. If it is impossible to give your dog freedom to the entire home, try to allow the dog access to the areas where the family spends the most time such as kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms rather than segregating the dog. When outside, the dog should ideally have run of a fenced in yard where he can choose where to go and how long to stay. If the dog must be leashed walked, walk the dog on a loose leash and allow him to choose where to walk as much as possible. You may wish to try a body harness on your dog rather than a head halter or neck collar to give your dog freedom of his head.
- **Company** - As mentioned earlier, being allowed to be involved in group activities with family members can greatly elevate a dog's perceived status. Try to include your dog in daily activities and give your dog attention when it is solicited.
- **Respect your dog's property** - In a wild canid pack, the omega animal has last dibs on everything including food and resting areas. The other members of the pack usually are able to take away anything from the omega animal. By allowing your dog to sleep undisturbed in his resting place or

to have unrestricted play with a toy or bone, you can elevate his perceived status.

- **Further confidence builders** - Once your dog is well established in the reverse dominance program, you may want to consider getting involved in a dog related activity to further boost your dog's confidence. For example, agility classes and fly ball teams are available in most areas and can provide an outlet for your dog to further explore his abilities. Or, you may wish to investigate a breed related activity such as lure coursing for sight hounds, carting for draft breeds, and ground trials for terriers. If you have a sporting breed you could get involved in retrieving/sporting trials (no prey animal is harmed) or if you have a herding breed, herding classes. No matter what type of activity you choose, it is important to have patience and proceed at your dog's pace. You can get more information about dog related activities in your area by contacting your local veterinarian or American Kennel Club chapter or by searching on the world wide web.

Multi-dog households - Starting a reverse dominance program in a multi-dog household is a little more difficult in that you must balance boosting your omega dog's confidence with not disrupting the established hierarchy between your dogs. To maintain the hierarchy, it is important that the top dog (usually the oldest and one that has been in the home the longest) receive all valued assets first. Valued assets include meals, toys, affection and going outside. The second ranking dog should receive valued assets second and this should be continued down the line until the omega dog receives his value assets. Once the omega dog receives his valued asset, it will be important to prevent the other dogs from stealing it from him either through barriers or making sure that all dogs are occupied at the same time. Occasionally, a top dog only needs to stare at an omega dog to make it stop eating or drop a toy. If this is the case, you may need to separate your dogs with occlusive barriers on occasion. If, during the reverse dominance program, you observe an increase in aggression between your dogs you may need to stop the program and consult a veterinary behaviorist or a certified applied animal behaviorist on how to proceed further.

Caveat - In a very small percentage of dogs, the reverse dominance program has the potential of being too successful, leaving you with a dominant aggressive dog. If your dog begins to show any aggression towards you or other family members, back off of the reverse dominance program and start asking your dog to perform a command (sit, down) before receiving any valued asset (food, toys, attention, etc.). If the aggression doesn't resolve, contact your local veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist.