

Loving Leadership by Terena Thomas

Whether you're bringing home your new puppy, or a freshly re-homed pooch from the pound, the process of building a relationship with your four legged companion is the same. Every dog pack needs a leader, and since you and your family have just become your pup's surrogate pack, it's easiest to establish that role now. Gone are the days of the rolled up newspaper, choke chain and Alpha Roll Over (known as the WWF body slam to many) which are barbaric methods of dominance and oppression. But do you know what you're supposed to do now?

With four easy steps you can establish a relationship with your pup that is loving, secure and appropriate within the dynamic of a human family. If you want an obedient dog that listens to you, you must be the Alpha in the family pecking order. Are you ready to become the leader of your pack?

Your dog must see you as the master and giver of four areas in his life: food, sleeping arrangements, playtime and grooming. All of these areas are equally important and must all be addressed consistently in order for your pup to be convinced that you, are indeed, his leader. Let's start with mealtime.

In a dog pack the Alpha, or leader, is in charge of who eats and when, with his meal always coming first. With this in mind, all humans in the pack should eat before your pooch in order to send him a clear message that all two legged beings are above him in the pecking order. Some pooches will throw a fit over this, especially if they are confused about who the leader is. Try not to give in to his sad puppy eyes or whimpers of sadness since these are ploys to get you, the Alpha, to concede. Stand strong and demonstrate leadership by not reinforcing his begging by giving him attention or food scraps.

The Alpha of the pack is also in charge of where each member sleeps. The leader always sleeps in the highest place with the best bedding and because we use beds, we have already prepared our human family to be the leaders of our pack. Continue establishing this by encouraging your pup to sleep on your bedroom floor, either loose, tethered to the bed or in a crate which is reminiscent of his natural den.

Playtime is always a highlight, so setting up appropriate games with particular guidelines will ensure that this happy time is also constructive in establishing your leadership. If your pup believes that he is smarter, faster, more agile or stronger than any of the other pack members, he may get confused as to why he's not the boss of the pack. With this in mind, eliminate all games of tug-o-war, chase or wrestling unless the humans in the pack win EVERY time. Play hide and seek or retrieve instead. Teach your pup to kick a ball and incorporate his training into his playtime. Ask your dog to sit between each activity, and don't proceed until he listens to you. Be certain that you initiate and terminate playtime on *your terms*. If *you're* the leader then when you say playtime is over, there should be no challenges to that decision from your four legged buddy.

Grooming is the last major area that you must have total control over. Even if you have a pup that needs little brushing, practicing good grooming habits will make handling your pooch easier. Pick up each paw and massaging it until your pup no longer mouths your hand. Look in each of your dog's ears, making certain to handle them gently and use lots of low, calm praise or food tidbits for behaving correctly. Brush your pup over his entire body until he stops fussing and trying to chew on either you or the brush. Try tethering him with a short lead so that you have two hands free to steady his body. Keep the training fun and filled with praise and treats. Do this two to three times per week until grooming is something he looks forward to instead of making it a battle of wills.

Lastly, think of what kind of boss you would want to have; someone who tells you what they want, when they want it and how it should be done. Consistent boundaries (with reasonable and humane consequences for testing those limits), will teach your dog to trust you rather than fear you. Using your brains instead of your brawn to train will encourage confidence from your dog while also emphasizing your Alpha roll. Remember, anybody can be a leader, but it takes commitment, consistency and kindness to be a *loving* leader.