

Understanding Pack Behavior

Dogs have a well-developed social system. This system establishes orderly relations among the members. In order for a group of animals to function efficiently the system must have an order and a process of communication which helps to promote that order.

Social behavior of animals can be organized in many ways. The most famous of these is the "pecking order". "Pecking order" structures a social ladder in which each member of the group occupies a certain rank or position. The highest-ranking bird can peck every other member of the flock without retaliation. The second highest accepts the pecking only by the highest member and in turn can peck all lower-ranking birds. Other species besides birds may also organize social behavior around the general idea of pecking order. However, the actual show of dominance may display itself in a variety of ways. As a result this system is now more generally known as the "dominance order".

The Social System of the Pack

There are two separate dominance orders within each pack: a male order and a female order. The highest ranking member of each order occupies the "alpha" position. "Alpha" is followed by the "beta" individual and so forth until the last position which is called "omega" (as in the Greek alphabet). Very few individuals are considered "equal".

Alpha positions are usually occupied by a mated pair. The ultimate dominant individual can be either the male or female and that individual directs the activities of the pack. In studies done on wolves, however, it is interesting to note that sometimes the alpha male refrains from breeding the alpha female. He will allow a lower ranking male to mate with her instead.

In Wolf packs the alpha male and female are usually the parents of the subordinate pack-mates. Very rarely are strange wolves allowed to enter an established wolf pack. As canines are "first cousins" to Wolves this may help to explain why the entry of a strange dog to the pack can result in an escalation of fights. In well-established packs there are other possible classifications of social ranking : 1. mature subordinate animals 2. outcasts or dogs who rank so low that they avoid the main pack members and 3. juveniles who do not become part of the pack nucleus until they are much older. Dominance orders cross sexual lines in immature animals and do not divide into male/female orders until sexual maturity.

The older a pack is ... the more stable its social structure becomes. When the alpha male dies, grows old or weak the resulting competition for the alpha position may disrupt the social stability of the pack.

Most conflicts within a pack are not severe. Some behavior may appear severe as the animals display ritualistic threatening postures, noise and fighting. Occasionally the fighting may escalate causing serious injury or death. Often several animals in the pack will "gang up" on one of the dogs involved. An interesting note... in Wolves the dominant alpha will usually break up the fight before such serious problems occur. Most of the time, this happens when the dominant male places himself between the two fighting parties but doesn't participate in the fight itself.

Leadership within the pack is a matter of supreme importance. The leader of the pack initiates the play pattern, which direction the pack will travel, when to rest and when it is time to hunt. A well established leader rarely has his authority challenged. He/she directs pack activities and also takes the initiative in reacting to intrusions. The leader is neither despotic nor democratic but a combination of both.

Because dog packs are highly organized ... order is the rule. Dogs within each pack generally interact predictably and the social structure of the groups is maintained. Much of the behavior is directed toward the goal of either maintaining ones social status or possibly raising it. A dog's social status is unusually established early in life but circumstance may change this position. Any drastic disturbance such as the loss or addition of pack members can trigger a status rearrangement. Each and every member is constantly watchful and interested in all socially important happenings within the pack. In particular, status quarrels are never private affairs between two individuals. The whole society may participate in the final outcome.

The role of the omega dog is crucial to the stability of day to day pack life. Usually this animal is the outcast and is not allowed to join in pack activities. Some scientists believe that the omega position offers a way for wolves to disperse energy. If the omega strays from allotted territory or attempts to join in on a feeding the pack will persecute the omega until order is restored. Energy is released during the confrontation and this is immediately followed by a period of peace.

Communication of the Pack

Certain postures and gestures express the inner state of a dog. Other dogs notice these patterns and will respond in characteristic ways depending on their own particular feelings. It is thought that patterns of expression have evolved to help hold the pack together and to reduce aggression among its members.

A pattern of behavior involves the entire physical posture of a dog. Usually there is a rearrangement of the posture and position of most body parts. Whimpering, growling or other sounds may also accompany these positions. Body odor may also change with the behavior but little is known about this aspect. A keen eye is needed to observe and understand the different postures.

Facial expressions indicate one level of behavioral change. For example, ears pinned back with drawn-back lips indicates aggression because the dog is insecure. Ears forward with full tooth display indicates a full threat by a dominant dog.

The position of the dog's tail coupled with other parts of the body can indicate the mood of the dog. The range of noticeable emotion varies anywhere from happy to depressed.

An important contributing factor to harmony within a pack is the display of submission. Rolling over, spreading the legs and submitting the tender skin of the stomach and genital area to pack inspection is the ultimate example of submissive behavior. Sometimes a simple lowering of the head is enough to communicate submissiveness. Submissive behavior can also serve as an expression of canine friendliness. The dominant animal often responds to these displays with tolerance, friendliness and superiority ... but not always.

There are two types of submission - active and passive. Active submission features friendliness and is fostered by a friendly and tolerant response from the dominant pair. Passive submission is a demonstration of inferiority and helplessness. The response of the dominant animal is usually a show of self-assertion and less tolerance. Researchers have traced the development of both active and passive submission patterns from food-begging to eliminative behavior in pups.

Without a doubt vocal communication between dogs is extremely important. Some of the basic types of vocal communication are: the whimper, the growl, the bark and the howl. The whimper can indicate either submissiveness or a friendly greeting. Growling can be a sign of aggressiveness. Barking can either declare alarm or display the stance for a possible challenge. Barking also has varying degrees of sound. The bark/whine can also point out a desire to obtain something or can be used as a warning.

The "howl" is usually associated with Wolves. While many people attribute the howling of a dog to loneliness ... such is really not the case. Howling is actually used to locate other pack members or to call a "meeting". Howling of the group is often preceded by whines and wags of tails. Researchers discovered that by imitating the howl an individual could draw a group of wolves to the researchers' area. While most people associate a wolf howl with the full moon ... wolves will spontaneously howl during the day. Howling is considered a community activity or a happy social event. Wolves have been known to run almost any distance to join in. This is why many individuals believe that howling is used to assemble the pack.

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